

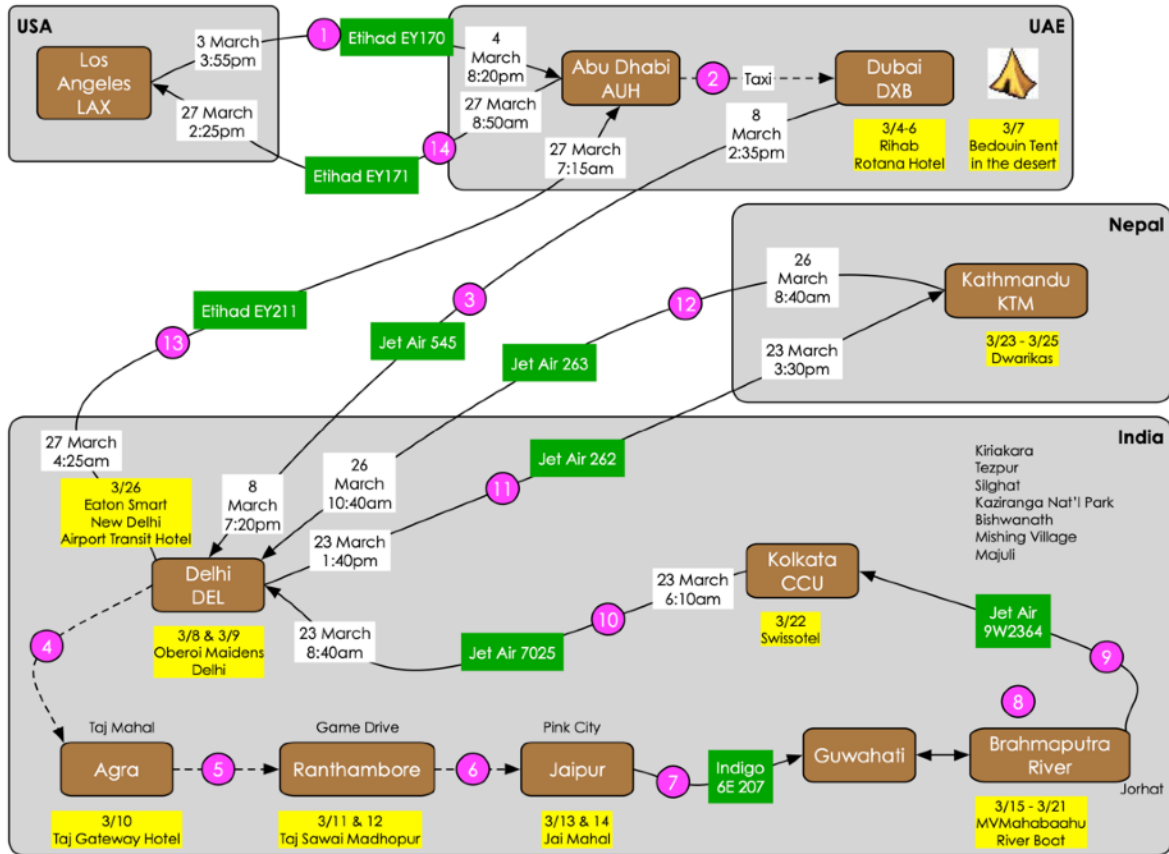
# UAE to India to Nepal 2015

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# The Diagram that Started Them All



## UAE

### Installment 1: Getting there

My biggest piece of travel advice is that which my sister-in-law Laurie gave me many years ago. Get an airline credit card and charge the living daylight out of it. Don't buy a piece of GUM without using that credit card. We chose American (as did she) and we've been able to go on these amazing trips paying very little of our way.

It's a nightmare to figure out what airlines honor American miles internationally because they keep it a secret from you. Steve spent weeks hunting and discovered that we could use our American miles on Etihad Airways to get business class to Abu Dhabi, UAE and back in a straight shot, no stopovers anywhere!

Here's a couple of shots of Steve and me awaiting our flight:





Etihad Airways treated us REALLY well. Steve's favorite deserts are either chocolate and orange (his mom's influence) or chocolate and raspberry. This desert was chocolate and orange and raspberry so he was pretty much in heaven.



For the geeks out there, the displays had a really cool option: we could watch cameras mounted on the outside of the aircraft. Here we are taxiing down the runway at LAX. Steve's monitor on the left is looking straight down, mine on the right is the forward-looking camera. Steve's got more fun as we went over the ocean as we took off.



We enjoyed watching the maps after that. I have to admit that until I saw this I didn't know we weren't simply flying west to east. Now we can say we've been over Greenland?



The flight was supposed to be 16 hours but we got there in 15. Since we had fully lay-flat seats, we were able to sleep pretty well so the time went by pretty quickly. Watching Pirates of the Caribbean, At World's End helped pass the time.

We flew into Abu Dhabi in UAE and then had to crack the code on how to take a cab from there to our first destination, Dubai. It wasn't too hard but did entail taking out Dirhams from an ATM. Oddly, Dirhams are abbreviated AED so we'll just stick with that. It was around 300AED for the cab trip, and with an exchange rate of 3.4, that means it was a mere \$83 for that hour and a half drive in a beautiful taxi with a lovely driver. This was probably the one thing I was worried about so I was relieved when it worked out perfectly.

We got in around 10 at night (UAE is 12 hours ahead of LA so I didn't even have to change my watch!) and went up to the rooftop pool just for fun. The Rihab Rotana (look at your diagram, kids) is lovely with fantastic service, but the Internet is very expensive and VERY slow. Hope this goes through!



Tomorrow, we hope to do the “Hop on, Hop off” bus to tour around Dubai.

## Installment 2: Touristas in Dubai

Yesterday, in my zeal to get out the first installment, I neglected to ask Steve for photos and I wanted to show you this one of us suffering on our 16-hour flight from LA to Abu Dhabi:



Mosques are everywhere in Dubai. We are awakened every morning at 5:19 by the morning Call to Prayer. This beautiful, melodious male voice sang a very haunting song that resonates throughout the area. Luckily, we're pretty much awake that early, but a very vivid reminder that we're not in Kansas anymore.

We finally made contact at breakfast with the first four of our group, Wally and Wendy, Rally and Caroline. Everyone on this trip are people we met through the Mac Mania cruise that we did a

few years ago in Australia. Evidently, that cruise created a lot of bonds - we've met up with Devon and Maryanne, and Jean, and these folks have all met up with each other a bunch of times since we saw them last. These folks are REALLY big into travel. Rally and Caroline just got back from Korea and Vietnam. Nice to have such courageous people on our team.

We decided to use the "hop on hop off" bus to see the city. This is one of those classic tourist things to do. It's a giant red double-decker bus that you pay one fee to travel through four different areas over the course of a couple of days. Sounded like fun and overall it worked well but we were astounded by the amount of traffic there was on a Thursday morning in Dubai. It took FOREVER to go around the first loop so we didn't get to see nearly as much as we would have hoped.

Here's a picture of us being tourist dorks:



To my friend Gary who asked for information on humidity, no problem at all in March in Dubai. It was probably around 80 yesterday, but only hot in the full sun and definitely not humid, very dry. It was also really windy in the afternoon.

A big advantage of the bus tour was that with the included headphones we learned about the city. They actually didn't talk as much as I would have liked them to it was so interesting. They told us about the "National Dress" which I found fascinating. The men wear all white (to stay cool) as you can see in the photo below. The women on the other hand wear intricately beautiful embroidered gowns...covered in all black coats with black over their heads. Um, what about that staying cool thing???



Our favorite part of the bus tour was that it included a one-hour trip on a Dhow (boat) on the Dubai Creek (giant river). The port itself was astonishing. There were many many very ancient and unseaworthy-looking dhows filled with boxes for transport to other countries. They were moored all tied together, making us keep questioning how the heck the first ones to dock ever got out!



We learned from the little voice in our heads that the Arabian Gulf, while vast, is shallow (350 feet max) and very calm, which explained why these boats weren't all sunk long ago.

Your intrepid travelers on the dhow, very proud of ourselves for wearing hats all day!



Contrast of the old dhows against the city skyline:



I thought this wood boat was cool.



Wally and Steve look as though they're discussing the local culture and architecture but I snuck up on them and they were talking about Final Cut Pro X plugins...



I showed you the old dhows because it's about the only old thing we've seen here. Dubai is all new. Construction is everywhere, and

even the buildings that look old are actually brand new and made to look “authentic” but don’t fool the eye. I do like how different every building is different here, though. They don’t do plain rectangular buildings in Dubai. (And proof to Mark that I remembered my circular polarizing filter.)



I call this next one “self portrait”. If you look closely, you can see the reflection of our dhow on Dubai Creek in the building.



We didn't get a chance to stop at the public beach and let Allison put her little podfeet into the Arabian Gulf.



We hopped off the bus at Souk Madinat (souk means market) which was not a quaint little place with old stalls and interesting people. It was a giant mall of a place with high prices. Selfie time!



Kyle suggested to Steve that he buy a Ferrari while in Dubai (that's what one does, right?) Does this one look ok, Kyle?



Our goal in going to Souk Madinat was to go THROUGH it to get to the ocean so that we could get a good view of the Burg Al Arab Hotel. Instead, we stopped immediately for beers. Our friends did not think that their beers were too big. If you're keeping track,

next to me is Rally, Wally (yes, I confuse their names all the time), Caroline, and Wendy (photo credit to Steve).



The waitress had an interesting accent and we asked her where she was from, and she said Russia. Rally immediately started speaking Russian to her! It was crazy, we had no idea he spoke Russian. I took a picture of Rally and the waitress for Luke, who lives in Russia and he said "she looks Russian, in the constantly unhappy kind of way."

We also found out that Rally has a PhD in nuclear physics. Steve will be in heaven talking to him. I asked Rally how he felt about String Theory and he said, "it ties me in knots." It's going to be a LONG trip.

One of the most surprising things about Dubai to me is the prevalence of American companies. I've seen signs for Apple, Microsoft, Chilis, KFC, Starbucks, Oracle...it goes on and on.



After about 45 minutes of meandering through Souk Madinat we finally got to a vantage point where we thought we'd be able to walk to the Burg Al Arab Hotel to see it up close, when we were thwarted by a guard who explained that the beach was private and there was no passage. I couldn't help but point out to him that the beaches in California are public by law! He did not seem impressed. The hotel is still super cool to look at:



Our next goal was to walk to Palm Island, a man-made set of islands that look like a palm tree from above. This was not to be. We asked someone how far it was (it looked like 2 blocks on our map), but were told it was a 25-minute cab ride. I suspected the gentleman of a ruse because he was in charge of calling the taxis, but Rally used up a few precious megabytes of his data plan to find out it was 2 miles walking on a busy road. Good news though, the hop-on-hop-off bus showed up right then!



But...they didn't take us to Palm Island, they drove past it and in looking at the map they would be meandering around the city for quite some time before taking us to Palm Island. We heard them say that the Dubai Marina Promenade was a beautiful sight and that the sun was setting so we hopped off!



I think this was one of the most beautiful and architecturally interesting places. Notice the building over my right shoulder. It does a full 90 degree twist from the bottom to the top! Can you imagine how confusing it is to walk the halls there?

I call this photo, "Opulence Much?"



And the area got even more beautiful after the sun went down:



As we walked along the promenade we were accosted by representatives of every restaurant along the way. We finally decided to ask one of them about their wine list...to be told that THERE WAS NO WINE! And that none of these restaurants served alcohol! He told us that if we walked to the second bridge and went over, there was ONE restaurant with an alcohol license. Intrepid hikers that we are, we walked probably a full mile to bridge #2...only to find it blocked off so that people couldn't walk on it. We kept walking and ran out of any night time civilization, suspecting the gentleman of a ruse. (Noticing a pattern here?)

Ok, FINE. Rally and I figured out how to get us back out to the main drag (which was not at all easy) and we spotted a Radisson Hotel. They had told us on the bus that hotels had restaurants with alcohol licenses. No joy. We tiredly asked for cabs for the 17 miles back to our hotel, and collapsed into bed at 9pm with no dinner and no wine.

Well, there was WHINE at least...

### **Installment 3: Dubai Burj Khalifa and More**

We took off on the Big Bus again yesterday and Rally (who has become our de facto leader) had heard me say that I was sad that I didn't get to put the little piggy podfeet into the Arabian Gulf so he instructed us to hop off the bus at the beach this time. Yay!



The Burj Al Arab is an extraordinary hotel (conjuring images of a giant sail boat) and the one we tried to get to yesterday. At least we got an unobstructed view of it this time:



We ended up back at the same mall we went to before but this time discovered a Trader Vics, creators of the original MaiTai. We had to have one for Ron (and Rico):



Relaxing after walking nearly 200 feet that day:



Our real goal of the day was to try and get to the Burj Khalifa, the tallest building in the world, situated at the Dubai Mall. We got to the mall but really felt we must see the aquarium first. It was an arched tunnel that you could view from a distance from the outside, or go inside the tunnel for \$25. We felt adventurous (through thick glass) and were really glad we did. It was filled with giant, vicious-looking sharks and rays that would cover a small car!





We finally escaped the giant mall and came out to a giant man-made pond surrounded by extraordinary buildings. The Burj Khalifa is behind us as of when I took this photo and didn't see it yet. This raggedy old thing is just some silly hotel or something.



Steve enjoying the skyline:



And then we turned around. The Burj Khalifa is 2,716 feet tall. To put this in context, the Empire State Building is 1250 feet tall, which makes the Burj Khalifa more than TWICE as tall. One World Trade Center is 1,776 ft, the tallest in the western hemisphere,

which makes the Burj Khalifa 1,000 feet taller! Our friend Wally captured this unique perspective of the building with Steve as his model.



Our necks hurt.

The most amazing thing to me about Dubai is how new everything is. Our friend Knightwise from Belgium is always teasing us about the age of our buildings so I couldn't help but think of him when they told us that the first tall building in this area was built by Queen Elizabeth II in 1989. So this entire area of giant, creative, skyscrapers is only 26 years old. Seriously.

NOTHING here is old. I am amazed at the creativity too as I said, no two buildings are the same. This is the view of the drive back from the downtown Dubai area.



These twin buildings are equilateral TRIANGLES for crying out loud!



I'm sure by now you're all looking for an update on the wine issue. Rally (our intrepid leader) had searched out hotel restaurants based on their ability to serve wine and found one near that had a "passable wine list". We arrived and asked for their Chilean chardonnay. No, sorry, we're out of that chardonnay. How about this one? Nope. Actually we have no chardonnay. I'm sure it would amuse Devon and Maryanne that they tried to convince us we would like a nice sauvignon blanc.

I was bereft. I wept. I belly ached. I stomped my feet like a small child.

And then the waiter told me he'd go to the restaurant next door and get us a bottle of chardonnay.



We finished off the day in the most wonderful way possible. It was March 6th, which was Steve's dad, Ken's, 80th birthday. We had prearranged with his mom, Merlee, to stage a FaceTime call to him as a surprise. It worked perfectly! We were able to talk to him from a half a world away and even show him the Mosque outside our window that plays the beautiful Call to Prayer ever morning. The four of us chatted away and laughed extensively about how FaceTime is magical, especially in its ability to make everyone have the worst looking neck possible.

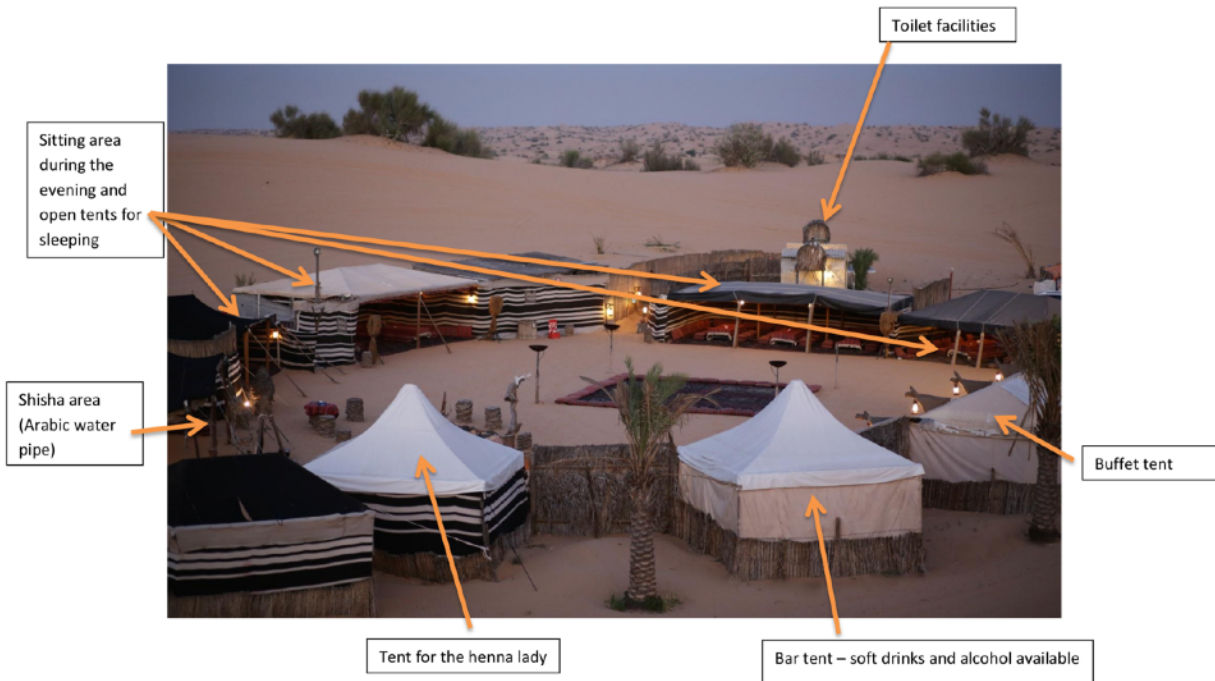
Happy Birthday Ken!



I want to thank Brandy and Lindsay for posting photos and videos to us of Buzzy and Tesla to show us how they're thriving under their care. I'm not sure either of them is missing us at all!

## Installment 4: Gold Souk

This is going to be a quick one because tonight we sleep in a Bedouin tent in the desert!



Today Steve and I headed out to the Gold Souk, or gold market with Rally and Caroline. They're nuts (and on distribution for this letter.) Caroline is like a dog sniffing out barbecue when it comes to gold and she haggles like the best of them. She bought a gorgeous gold knot necklace and I bought a pair of small gold earrings. I don't really understand the bargaining here though. The price started out at 600 dirham (\$171US). I offered 350 dirham and the guy said no, and put them away. I left the store. Caroline and Rally went back in later so I went back and had a different guy show me the same earrings. He said 600 dirham, I said 455 (and showed him the number on my calculator). He said, Ok, 355 dirham then. Uh, ok! So I got out for around a hundred bucks but I can't explain why!

Here's a couple of photos of the gold here. Puts the LA Jewelry Exchange to shame!

PUHLEEEEESE StevenP???



Is this enough gold???



Ok, off we go. Don't know how soon I'll be able to write again because we get back from the desert around 9am and have to leave by 11:30 to go to the airport to catch our flight to India!!!

## **Installment 5: Dune Bashing, Camel Riding, "Sleeping" in the Desert**

We survived our night in the desert! Aren't you relieved? Let's go back to the beginning of the evening though.

We were picked up by our trusty guide Arif at the hotel in a Toyota Land Cruiser that fit the seven of us. Steve and I volunteered (what WERE we thinking) to pretzel ourselves into the very back. (Note to Diane: it only took 2 Advil for me to recover from this.) We drove a long way by highway but then Arif pulled over and lowered the tire pressure down to 16 psi. This should have set off alarm bells...

He simply turned off the road into the desert sand and began the kind of activity appropriate for a dune buggy! He told us we could cry Uncle! at any time and, while Carolyn and I thought of the word much earlier than the others, we kept silent ... except for the screaming. Several times the car leaned over so far that even Steve admitted to being a bit worried about us rolling over (we noticed the Land Cruiser had roll bars). Then Rally got the idea that maybe he should get out of the car to take pictures of how far over we were because no one would believe us. As soon as the door opened, ALL of us got out but Wally! Here's a couple of pictures to give you the flavor for our adventure:



Now do you believe it was death defying?

Arif told us some interesting facts about the UAE:

- Even though he was born in the UAE, he is not a citizen. It is not possible for him to become a citizen. He remains Pakistani.
- If a non-native woman marries a native man, her children will become UAE citizens, but she will not.
- If a non-native man marries a native woman, his children and he will not become citizens

- In Dubai, it is illegal to be unemployed. You have a maximum of one month to find a job and, if you don't, you're thrown out of the country. He pointed out that there are no beggars as a result.
- Wendy asked how one retires, and he said that you cannot retire.

The next part of our adventure was probably my favorite thing we've done so far, and that was riding camels in the desert. Steve and I had a camel named Gozilla (I'm not kidding) and she was positively adorable. They're very gentle and sweet, not at all like we expected. No spitting, no biting! Steve got this shot of me having a moment with Gozilla:



Gozilla is only 9 years old, they live to be 25. Our guide explained that she was a polo camel and that they run very fast. Steve suspects that's why these particular camels were so well behaved.

This was our view as we walked into the setting sun.



Our guide would talk to Gozilla from time to time and she would actually talk back to him. She's giving him lip right now:



After we got off, she gave Steve even MORE lip!



Here's a shot of us after the camel riding - so happy!



I should have mentioned at the outset that Don and Barbara decided that while having dinner out at the Bedouin tent sounded like a grand idea, they opted out of the death defying dune bashing and camel riding.

When we finally arrived at the camp, it was to be greeted by an extraordinary energetic hug from Barbara. Turns out they'd been delivered to camp ALONE for a full hour. So here's this big camp where there's supposed to be about 30 people and she's alone with Don and CONVINCED that they've been kidnapped and will never see family and friends again. Barbara gives better hugs than just about anybody but those hugs she gave us were bone crushing! We felt terrible for her but she recovered quickly.

Here's the camp from above:



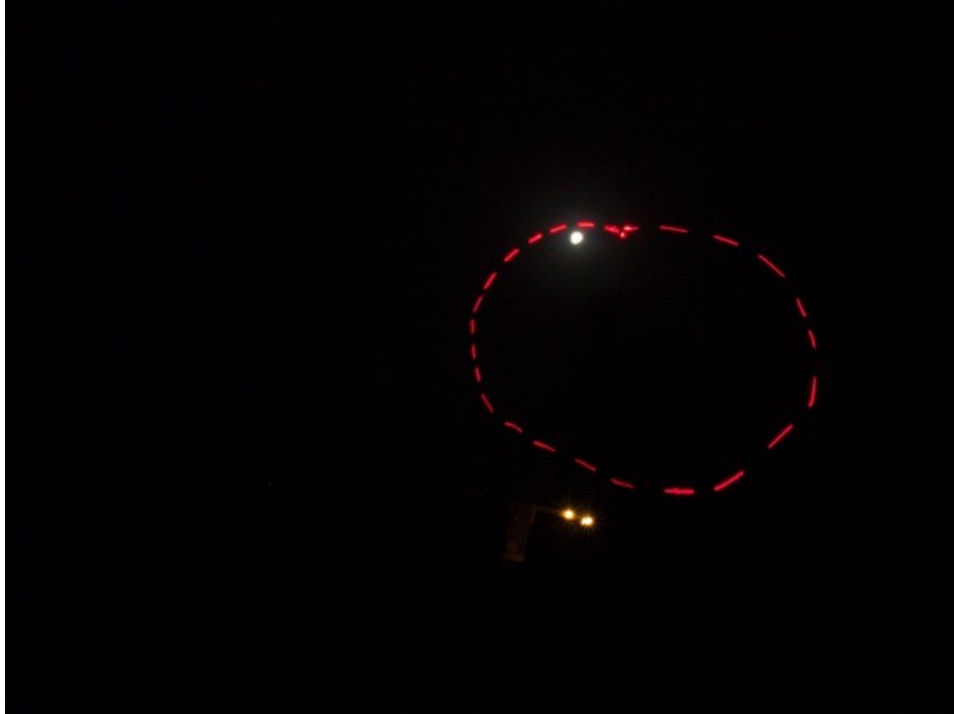
Rally packed four bottles of VERY good wine for the night in the desert but when we arrived they told us that wasn't allowed. They wanted us to buy the rotgut house red wine instead. We came up with an elaborate ruse. We bought one bottle of rotgut, then Steve pretended to pour from that same bottle all night long, but in secret Rally was pouring from the good stuff, and I mean GOOD STUFF!

I practiced at home on a technique to take pictures of the stars in motion, but sadly there were very few stars visible because of the dust in the air and we were hampered by a full moon. This sand is like a silky powder, nothing like sand we've ever felt before. A nice feature of my new hiking shoes is they're well ventilated, so my shoes were FILLED with this fine sand!

We couldn't take star picture so instead we played around with light painting with our flashlights. Steve, Wally and Rally worked together to draw this:



And Steve had fun with his red strobe light:



but I think Rally won when he drew a pig! Watching him hop to make the legs was hilarious. Yes, the wine was BEFORE this hard work.



You'll notice I put "sleeping" in quotes in the title. We all agreed that this adventure did not include actual sleep. It was COLD in these tents, the sleeping bags didn't zip up (I slept in my down jacket and was still cold), the "mattresses" were thin enough that it felt like hard ground. It turns out this desolate Bedouin camp is right under the flight path for the Dubai International Airport, and we're pretty sure Arif was right when he said it's one of the busiest in the world! Carolyn checked the top of her tent for wheel marks when she got up because they were flying so low over us!

In the middle of the night, as Wendy said, some animal murdered another one right outside our tent. Arif claimed it was a desert cat but Wally said it was a Burmese Tiger. Wally and Steve found these tracks in the sand to prove it:



All in all I'd say we were jealous of Don and Barbara sleeping in their comfy beds in the hotel!

The good news is that we were finally released at dawn from our sleepless tents to watch the sunrise...which was again obscured by dust but we were all chipper enough anyway!



Here's a final shot of Steve and me and our little tent:



In a couple of hours we're off to India, flying from Dubai into New Delhi to start phase two of our adventure. We are pretty sure it's going to be a massive culture shock to go from the opulence of Dubai to India but we're braced for it.

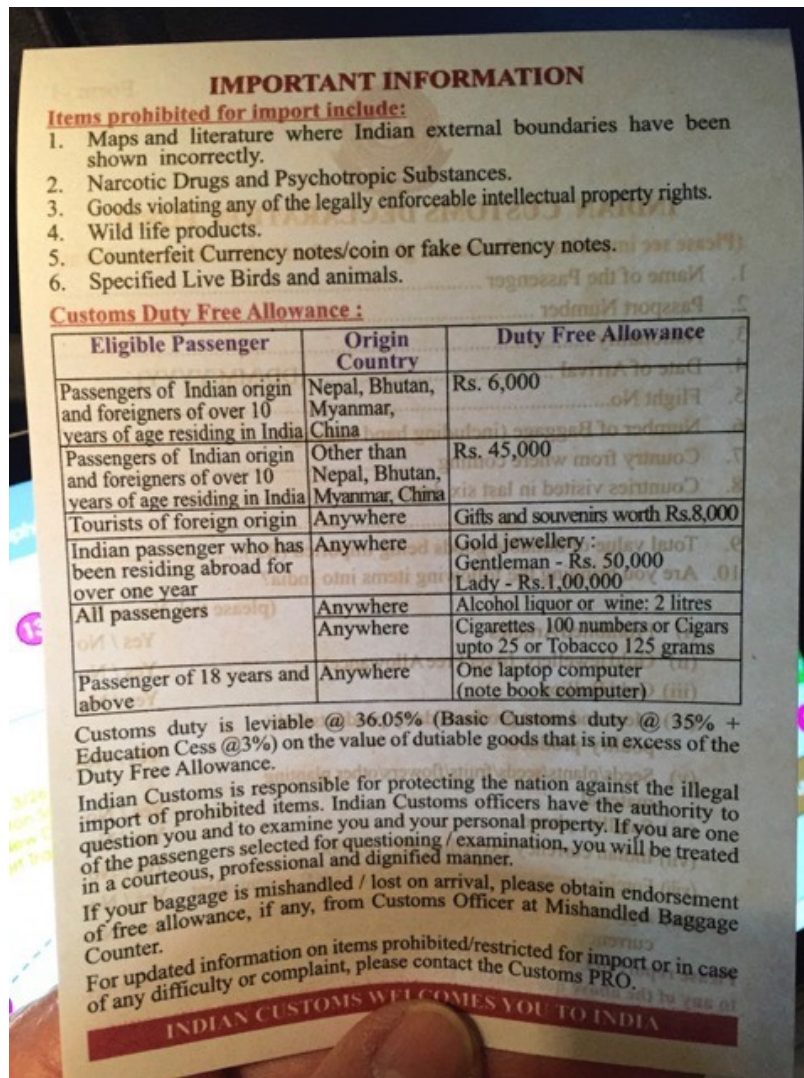
## Installment 6: Arriving in India

Before we get into this very short update, I wanted to insert a photo of another FaceTime we had while in Dubai. Kyle is working nights as a laborer because the union is on strike at the refinery. The good news is he gets to wear a hard hat and for some reason two pairs of goggles. It was fun to see him, still can't get over the ability to talk to him a half a world away. By the way, in this shot he's showing us the moon. He's so smart.



We spent yesterday simply getting back from the desert, showering, packing, waiting at the airport, flying (a dreadful experience that I won't share), waiting in odd lines seeming to have something to do with Visas and Ebola check points (no temperatures taken, we just had to say we weren't sick), and customs (he looked at our form and waved us through) and a long ride from the airport to the hotel.

I will share a funny thing, on the Customs form they told you the six things you are not allowed to bring into India. I would like to point out that the NUMBER ONE THING you can't bring in is maps showing India's borders incorrectly depicted. Second is narcotics.



If you've spent any time with me at all, you'll know that time zones give me fits. Dubai was lovely because it was exactly 12 hours ahead of LA, so if it was day for me, night for the kids. Easy peasy. Then we flew to Delhi and it added an hour and a half. Oh great, not even an even number. So we landed and I shot off a quick note to the family to let them know we were safe, and noted that we were 13.5 hours apart. And then guess what happened? The US did Daylight Saving Time. So now it's 12.5 hours ahead but for all I know, tomorrow we'll observe DST in Delhi!!!

The good news is that Nepal is off by another 15 minutes!  
Seriously. They're killing me here!  
Here's a picture of us Rally captured as we arrived at the Oberio  
Maidens Hotel. Our room is extraordinary with huge high ceilings  
and three rooms - we could pack another 12 people in here and  
not even run into each other! I'm sad we're only here for two  
nights, I want to live in this hotel.



## **Installment 6.1 - The Flight to New Delhi**

I forgot something - the one thing I DID want to tell you about our dreadful flight from Dubai to New Delhi was that at the end of the flight they sprayed down the passengers with a disinfectant spray!

They assured us that it had been approved by the World Health Organization.

Maybe that gives you just a little bit of flavor of the flight...

## India

### Installment 7: Delhi

Ok, WOW. Seriously.

I'll start from the beginning. Our hotel in Delhi, called the Oberoi Maidens Hotel, may be the coolest room we've ever had in our lives. It's HUGE. It has a giant living room, a bit bigger than, say, my living room!



We took off in a big coach bus for the 10 of us on our first day tour. We went to Jama Masjid, India's largest Mosque. It's not well used, kind of falling down, but had an interesting feel to it. We had to take our shoes off, which was GREAT for me because I'd rather be

barefoot most of the time but others felt the need to buy little slippers to wear or they chose to wear their socks. Silliness I say!



They made the women wear these DIVINE gowns - here are Barbara and me showing them off:



Traffic is absolutely NUTS in Delhi. It flows really well but it's completely against reason that people aren't dying every 2-3 minutes. There are busses and small cars and bicycles and tuk-tuks (rickshaws with motors), all sharing a road with lines on it only there as occasional guidelines. They honk their horns CONSTANTLY and it's mind bending to watch.

This is a tuk-tuk:



Speaking of traffic, the COOLEST thing we did all day was ride in a bicycle rickshaw through one of Delhi's market areas. It was

AMAZING. This is where we really got a feel for the area. Here's a photo of their power/phone/internet lines in this area:



This shot really shows how crazy the ride was on the rickshaw. That's Gabrielle and Jacques (who have just joined us) in front of us as we go through the crush of humanity:



I think Don described the experience of riding in this chaos best. He said it was like an amusement park ride where it looks like you're about to crash into things, but because you're on a defined

track nothing actually ever goes wrong. He said that gave him peace as he went through this.



When we get back I'm sure Steve will post some video of the insanity! By the way, we all agreed that this was by far our favorite thing we did in Delhi today.

We stopped for lunch and had some amazing Indian food where Wally introduced Steve to India's Kingfisher beer (they seem to be bonding over the beer more than over video editing these days).



We travelled to Raj Ghat which is where Gandhi was cremated. I'm trying to come up with something poetic to say about it but it wasn't a fascinating place with rich history. He was cremated there but sprinkled in the Ganges river so there's not much there to look at.



Steve wanted to pose in front of the police station along our way:



We visited Qutb Minar, which is was really beautiful and yet sad. Evidently one of the first Muslim leaders forced Hindu workers to

build some structures for him out of sandstone, one of which is the beautiful Minar:



Here's a closeup on the detail:



He wanted domes built and arches as is expected, but they didn't know how to make them because they hadn't learned about the ever important Keystone yet. Instead they made "almost" arches like this one through which you can see the Minar:



The leader also made them tear out structures from 17 different Hindu temples and bring them here, and then made them scrape off any designs of any animals or humans because that was against his religion. It was sad to see these things defaced so I didn't photograph them.

I'd heard that these kind of tours always end up with trying to get you to buy rugs, and it happened. It was a really cool experience though at the Cottage Industries Exposition. A guy showed us how they hand tie knots for every single thread in the rugs, either from wool or silk. It takes a family of three 1.5 years to create one single 8'x10' rug! The silk ones (which are higher density because the thread is so much smaller) take even longer. This guy

demonstrated how to tie the knots and I made him let me do a couple:



It's amazing how compelling these guys are, I was actually tempted! I've never been a big fan of rugs. I have no place to put one but I found myself trying to justify buying one! Luckily the one I really liked was \$7000...



Tomorrow we drive for four hours to move hotels (which makes me VERY sad because I want to live at this hotel forever), so I'm not sure we'll get an installment out!

I'm off to watch the Apple announcement in the lobby with Don, Wally and Steve so I'll leave you with this photo of Steve and me in the rickshaw!



## **Installment 8: Fort Agra and Taj Mahal**

Things have turned into a whirlwind on this trip! We're getting up almost as early as Ken would like, and have been at two different hotels since last we "spoke". I've been trying to take notes because I'm afraid I'll forget where we've been and what we've done!

One note - from here outward please assume that any and all photos have been taken by me or Steve (or maybe even one of our trusted companions!)

We drove from Delhi to Agra which is about a 3 hour drive in a nice big air conditioned coach with room for 20 but only the 10 of us on board. Agra is home to the Taj Mahal but first we went to Fort Agra which was pretty darn cool too. Built in 1665, the emperor there had something like 300 women in his harem. The fort is quite grand:





We learned one very important thing over the course of this trip. If you're a king, and you have a son, he will eventually kill you. Every story we have heard about emperors ends this way, except for the emperor who built Fort Agra. He got super lucky, his son only imprisoned him for the rest of his life. Being the best son ever, he also granted his dad's wish which was to imprison him in a room that would allow him to gaze at the Taj for the rest of his life. The bad news was that dad became nearsighted, so over time he could no longer see the Taj. Again, that darn sweet boy helped dad out by putting a diamond up that would reflect the light and allow him to see the Taj up close.

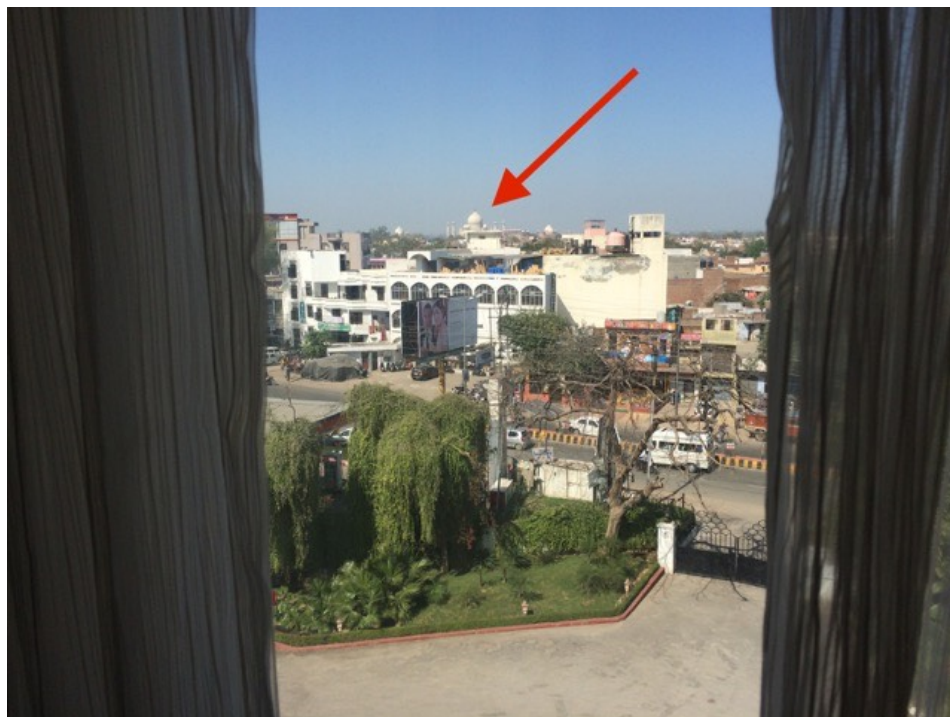
The guide told that story while we were standing here, so we'll say that window to the right is where he was looking, shall we? The ornate walls you see here are made of inlaid semi-precious stones into marble. We'll chat about that a LOT later.



If you've been following our adventures for a long time, there's a funny story about how Ron, Rico and I got in big trouble in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Steve thought we should re-enact the hilarity at the Fort:



We were carted off to our hotel after that and saw the Taj (all the cool kids shorten the name like that) from our hotel room window:



Ok, that was just for comedy. Here we are at the Taj:



Two unusual things we learned about the Taj. The minarets on the four sides are tilted 3 degrees outward, so that when you view it they look perfectly vertical instead of having the vanishing point angle you'd expect. As soon as he told us that they looked tilted outwards!

How about a side view?



Our guide took this cool shot of the Taj with Steve's assistance:



Our guide suggested that we go to the Taj not at sunset for the perfect light but mid-afternoon because the crowds would be crushing (evidently last week during the holiday they had 30,000 people a DAY going through!) That made the photographers sad, which is all but 2 of us, but then he explained that the Taj is symmetrical from all four sides so he would take us to the back side and let us watch it at sunset.

This was one of our favorite things because we simply sat on a wall and relaxed and enjoyed.



Speaking of photographers - Kyle, you know how it drives you bonkers how many photos I take? You'd lose your mind with the eight of us. Some of us have up to three cameras going at once! I believe we're taking in excess of a thousand pictures a day...not counting video. It's kind of nuts but fun too.

And a sunset photo of us:



For reasons that were not made abundantly clear to me, they clean the Taj with mud. Not double secret cool mud, just plain old mud.



Evidently there's a formula to these tours, when they have you captive and all you really want is a double gin and tonic (by the

way, that's not just me, ALL the girls love gin and tonics), they take you to a place to spend money. After the Fort and the Taj, the guide took us to a small place where they make the stone inlaid work I mentioned earlier. The Taj is completely covered in ornate designs of these semi-precious stones glued into the white marble. This special glue is an ancient secret that will not be shared. Hilary Clinton asked for it and they told her if she gave them the secret to Coca Cola they'd tell her!

The process for hand carving the semi-precious stones is a guy has a vertical grinding wheel maybe 2 feet in diameter which he turns with a crank on one side. He holds the stone on the opposite side with his bare fingers and grinds it to the desired shape. You can see some of the very large stones in the photos below, but he was cutting some down to the thickness of a few human hairs! The part that bothered me though was that then they take metal hand tools and dig out pockets in sandstone (seen on the left of the photo) into which they place the stones - the sound would have made Nolan run screaming from the room.



Here's an example of the finished work up close:



Driving places within India continues to be a source of endless entertainment. They ask an awful lot of their vehicles too. As you can see in the photo below, the trailer is loaded down with so many sacks of potatoes that the tractor is popping a wheelie, which made moving for everyone else really difficult.



Our next installment (when we can get it out) will be from the Ranthambhore Game Reserve!

## **Installment 9: Tigers of Ranthambore**

Let's do a little clerical work here before we get started to make sure we're all on the same page. I know you all studied your diagram before this class started right? We have just completed Step 5 of 14 so refresh your work and make sure you're keeping up. Secondly I'm a little worried that you're not paying very good attention because no one noticed that Installment 6 didn't have a title!

Thirdly, please set your expectations low on the rate of these installments as the internets are getting dodgier the farther we go. Today we were having trouble with the wifi in the lobby (not available in the rooms) and the guy rebooted the router for Steve. Then I noticed where he had it; it was behind the metal fireplace screen that had a nice fine mesh to it! Those of you familiar with electro-magnetic signals know that the simplest way to hinder a wifi signal is to put it in a metal cage or behind a metal screen of any sort! I suggested they pull it out of there and suddenly things were much better!

We took a 7-hour bus ride from Agra to the Ranthambore National Park where we checked into the Taj Sawai Madhopur hotel. The kids are always embarrassed by these photos but Steve enjoys doing the "first pose" so I indulge him!



Before I get too far into this story though I wanted to tell you that many of us like India much better than Dubai (I haven't polled the entire group, but I will upon request). Dubai had a fake, Disneyland-ish feel to it (no offense intended, Pat). The underlying anti-woman feeling really depressed me too. I feel like Dubai is a house of cards. They had some oil, they got some businesses to come in, then businesses came in because someone else had business there, and then they built these crazy buildings out in the middle of the desert. That made the tourists come. They say their economy only depends 7% on oil. But what else is there? It's a very odd business model in my humble opinion. Steve said you REALLY want to be in the crane business (tell your friend, Kyle) because there are cranes EVERYWHERE building more and more and more giant malls and hotels and places of "business". Reminds me of that line in the Muppet Christmas Carol, "Scrooge is a man of BUSINESS!"

India on the other hand is observed as being filled with incredibly industrious people. You have to pay attention to find someone doing nothing. They're making bricks, they're repairing shoes, they're dismantling cars, they're tending goats, they're digging holes, they're washing, they're sweeping, they're working in the

mustard seed and wheat fields (the women in gorgeous ornate sari's no less). No one is idle. I'm convinced if an earthquake brought this place down, the Indian people would rebuild it in about a week and a half. No cranes in sight, all people building and working. No one (visible) is marching around saying, "I'm in business!" I do understand that we're not seeing the wealthy side of life here, and I'm actually glad about that.

They're also VERY playful. Most of the trucks are decorated with the silliest stuff they can find - especially those carrying building supplies!



Back to the hotel for a quick second - you know how hotels NEVER look as good as they do in the photos? The Sawai in Ranthambore is just as extraordinary as the photos.



As soon as we arrived, they fed us lunch and then whisked us away on our first of three safaris. They explained that there are sections to the National Park and it's a lottery which jeeps get to go which way. We were directed to section 8 (I was glad it wasn't District 9) and our guide explained that in that section there is a female tiger who has just had 2 cubs a few months ago and we might get to see her. This was a very lucky sign he told us. In we went!



Up terrifying terrain (Diane you would have LOVED this):



## **Installment 10: Ranthambore National Park Part 2**

Or should this have been Installment 10.1? Oh well...

We took off on yet another safari at 6:30 am (you'd love the timetable here, Ken!) Our guide told us that while we were supposed to go to Area 7, a female tiger had made a kill of a giant deer in Area 6 so we were going there anyway. He assured us that it was only because he was good friends with the guy at the gate that he was able to do such a thing, but evidently the guy at the gate has many friends, because when we approached the area there were about 12 jeeps (there's supposed to be 4 in each area). Each jeep driver was trying to maneuver to the front in hopes of getting his passengers the best view, but it turns out you can't really compress jeeps. Lots of jawing between the drivers in rapid Indian. Steve said he'd love to have known what they were saying for so long, other than, "quit hogging the good view, MY turn!" over and over again.

When finally we got to the edge we had to peer through very dense brush (which made it REALLY hard to focus the camera so we had to use manual focus) but Steve captured one shot that we think you'll agree is an actual tiger.



Pretty darn cool.

I wore my new Ranger Rick vest and hat, and Steve noticed that there's Podfeet (or maybe Podpaws?) on the back!



Here's our happy group (Jacques, Gabby and Carolyn in the back):



The deer were abundant in the early morning walking quite close to our jeep to get to the watering hole:



The early morning light was spectacular for photography:



The jungle itself, while quite dry for what I think of as a jungle was also quite beautiful. We sat and listened to the birds singing for a while too.



We hit rush hour on the way back through Ranthambore. That's the milkman on the bottom right with the gold jugs:



One of the sources of fuel is cow pies. Everywhere you look they're stacked on the side of the road, on the roofs of "houses", in piles by the front doors of businesses. They are oddly identical in shape and size as though someone has the market on cow pie cookie cutters. Here's the weirdest thing - they don't smell at all, or at least we were never close enough to smell them.



I know, a lot of you are thinking, “wow, I never thought I’d get to see cow poop in a travelogue!” I know Luke & Kyle think it’s cool at least.

For the first time in a LONG week and a half we were given free time for a few hours. I know a lot of you were worried about our safety on this trip and it was well warranted. They let us bring GLASS to the poolside!



This was our 32nd wedding anniversary by the way - not a bad way to spend it!

## Installment 11: Jaipur

The adventure continues! We are staying at the Jai Mahal Palace which has the most spectacular grounds of any place we've stayed:



Last night there was a wedding taking place on those grounds, and we happened to walk down the hall right as they were photographing the bride. Now THAT'S a dress!



Jaipur was founded by Maharaja Jaising, and “our” means city, so Jai + Pur = Jaipur. The center of the city is called the Pink City which was built in 1737. They were very forward thinking, the buildings are all still standing and used, and the road is wide enough for two lanes of traffic. Crazy traffic but still it’s pretty impressive.

We went to the Palace City where we saw the solar observatory from the 1700s. You can see a non-traditional sundial below. The stairs have an edge to them that’s at exactly 27 degrees, so it draws a line on the arc you see below (we believe it’s a fulcrum of a cone) and tells you the time down to 2 seconds!



And here's the BIG version of the sun dial. That's me standing there for scale.



This is a two-piece sun dial that tells you time as well as seasons and constellation locations at various times of the year. The close bowl is missing those strips which are actually in the far bowl. The slots out of them are so that people can walk down below and read the dial.



As Jacques pointed out, it was ironic that they had all this great scientific equipment, but they used it to determine astrological signs. So there's that...

Here's Wally, Steve and me in front of the zodiac sign for Taurus, our birth sign. I want you to appreciate this photo because I had to do a half squat and my legs are so atrophied from sitting on buses and eating that it nearly killed me!



Speaking of lack of exercise, I figured out how to trick a fitbit. When we rode the camels, I got 10,000 steps and 31 flights of stairs! When we rode the jeeps up to see the tigers, I got 19,375 steps and 45 flights of stairs!

Ok, back to the tour - here's a cool shot of the Palace:



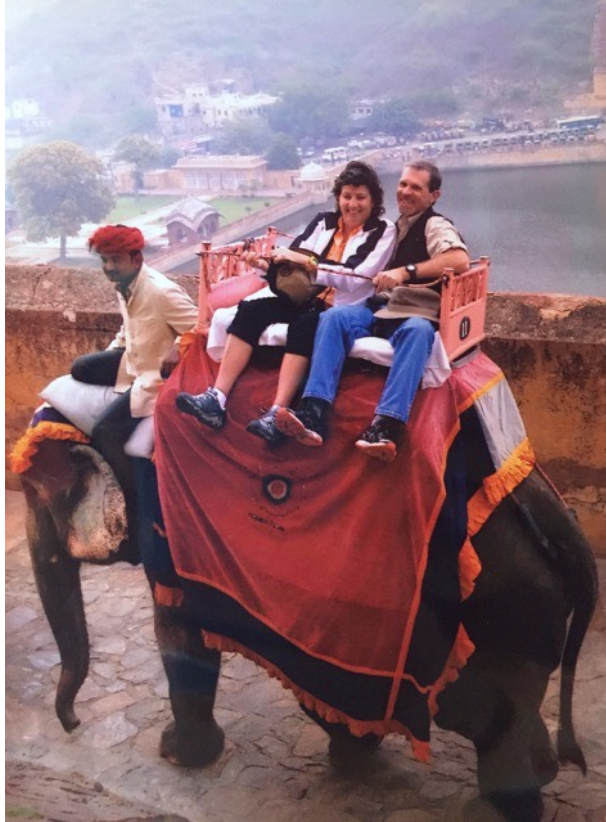
And Steve and me mugging for your entertainment:



The next day we went to the Amber Fort which was build in 1572. This might have been my favorite place so far. Maybe because we got to ride ELEPHANTS up to the fort! We saw this lovely elephant while waiting for our ride - isn't she beautiful? She even had her nails painted!



Our Elephant was named Lucky, 22 years old. They live to be 70-75. Lucky was the best one, she passed Everyone!



View from up top:



Amber Fort entrance:



View from above:





Even the ceiling was amazing at the Amber Fort:



I have a whole lot more cool pics of Amber Fort but you're probably drooping by this time, so we'll move on. After the Amber Fort, we made a quick stop to view the Summer Palace. This is a man made lake with a palace right in the middle. Gorgeous!



Tomorrow we get on a plane to Guwahati where we will get on our 7-day boat cruise on the Brahmaputra River. We're expecting zero Internets while on board the boat, so this might be our last letter for a very long time. If we get any Internet at all we'll try to drop a line to let you know we're still alive! When we get off the boat, it's off to Katmandu, Nepal!

## Installment 12: Dinner with a Noble Family

In possibly the oddest experience of the trip, our group had a delicious dinner hosted by a noble family from Jaipur, descendants of a Mararaji. Their home is 18,000 sq ft with 3 courtyards and multiple family generations all living together. We dined in a three-walled room with the fourth wall open to an interior court yard which is the view below. At one point the lights went out (which happens a lot here). Oddly they only had one candle so we had to use our phones' flashlights to light up our dinner.



The mother was delightful and entertaining, and the uncle was charming (he brought us a fabulous Indian rum). The daughter was something else. They split us into two tables but did odd proportions. The majority of our group was with the mother, while Rally, Caroline and me were with the 9 year old girl. She looks lovely in the photo below but she was actually a little ghou! She spent most of the night telling us about a place called Bhangarh, where a Magic Man was banished by the queen he loved and he died in the well. She explained that if you go there between sunset and sunrise, "you will be dead". She went on to describe a movie being made about it - including girls with dripping blood down their backs.

Here's the movie trailer about Bhangarh that she was sure I'd enjoy: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCM9z2TpZ8c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCM9z2TpZ8c)



Suddenly at 8:30 (we'd arrived at 6) the mother stood up and announced that our bus had arrived. It was very abrupt but we left the house, walked down the pathway back towards the street. We were struck by how quiet and serene it was at their home and anything BUT serene back out on the street. Our bus was not actually there, so we're pretty sure she just had another batch of tourists coming over after us. While we stood in the alley, we were suddenly being yelled at to move aside - because two giant cows were barreling down the alley.

I know many of you were worried about our safety and yet we have never felt unsafe on this trip...until we had to cross the street to get to the bus. Imagine the busiest road you know of. Now replace half of the cars with bicycles, motorcycles, cows, and warthogs (I'm not kidding)! And also take away all of the lines on the road but keep say, 3-4 lanes of vehicles moving. Now simply cross the road. At one point, our guide held up his hand to stop a BUS. The bus stopped, but then started moving again - and I was about a foot from it. Oh yeah, Steve just reminded me that it was, of course, night AND raining. Other than that, it was great.

The whole street-crossing thing only took about 30 seconds, but we were all happy to be alive afterwards.

Next installment will be from the boat on the Brahmaputra River!

## Installment 13: Arrival on the MV Mahabaahu River Boat

I won't be able to send this for ages, so no idea when you're getting this (might be in April) but here goes. We got up at 3 am (maybe even too early for Ken!) to catch a flight from Jaipur to Guwahati. We were on our way to our riverboat, the MV Mahabaahu. For spelling reasons I will refer to her as simply, the boat. Our merry band of 10 was joined at the airport by the other 10 people with whom we'd be sharing the boat, and we were trundled off into 10 separate cars (we're in car number 5 if you're wondering).

Before we could go to the boat, they took us to a temple. We had to cross a small bridge to get to the temple, and there Steve met a little friend:



Steve's little friend seemed quite harmless until he stood up and actually started moving towards our crowd of friends! We were glad to be on the other side by that time but he appeared rather menacing and made everyone a bit nervous I have to say.



I'm actually not going to waste precious bits showing you around the temple because it was pretty creepy. There is only one temple left in India where animal sacrifice is allowed, and this was it. They told us not to look left if we wanted to avoid seeing it happening, but they did not explain that we'd be able to hear it anyway. There were dreadful beggars following us around after we saw the temple too, so let's just move along to more pleasant things, shall we?

The boat is absolutely fantastic. It is definitely a floating 3 to 4-star hotel. Our room is spacious, the bed glorious, and the service divine. I'm pretty sure there are at least two people working on this boat for every one of us!

We're traveling on the Brahmaputra River which flows from Nepal down through India to the Bay of Bengal. Along the sides of the river are sand bars with huts and people and animals on them, but

these sand bars are flooded out every single year by the monsoons. The huts are destroyed and the people/animals leave and come back and rebuild the next year. They're very curious about us (the people, not the animals) and rush to the river bank to wave at us.



I spent a great deal of time with one group of children and successfully got them to stick their tongues out and waggle their fingers in their ears at me. I'm good with children, you see.

At dusk they pulled the boat up to the shore, which again is just sand bars as far as the eye can see. Several of the crew catapulted themselves across to the shore using long poles and then they threw huge pieces of wood over to them (maybe 6 x 6" and 4 feet long) and some pieces of bamboo. Oh and they threw over pick axes, shovels and a giant sledge hammer.

These guys dug about 4 feet deep, pushed the thick piece of wood into the ground, with bamboo sticking up at either end with the lines from the boat wrapped around them and then proceeded to pound in those long bamboo pieces into the ground and then buried the whole thing. Evidently that's what it takes to secure the boat!



The laid out a gangplank next so we could walk across to shore like the royalty we evidently are, but that's when it went up a notch. They strung a line from the top deck down to the beach, and lowered THE BAR down to us from the boat! They lowered tables

and chairs down to us, and then carted the liquor over the ramp and served us appetizers as we sipped our gin! It was amazing.

Here's one of the barrel tables being lowered down:



And here I am enjoying my gin with the bartender:



It was a magical night.

## **Installment 14: A Day at Sea...Well, River**

We started the day by doing yoga on the sandbar at 7 am (look at me up that early!) It was pretty darn magical being out on this giant plane of sand in the middle of nowhere as the sun rose.

We had a great day because they demanded nothing at all of us. We simply sat on the boat all day long as we traveled up the Brahmaputra River. If we cared to, we could go to seminars hosted by our naturalist Durgesh. He's pretty cool, so we've gone to all of them. He has been telling us a lot about the geography and history of the area (we're in the state of Assam) and I bet Bill would love it if I could remember any of it and tell you all here. I do remember him calling it The Braided River because from above the interweaving sand bars look like braids. The sands move so quickly here that navigation is actually really tricky. To us though it feels like we're on a predefined track, and the boat doesn't move or lurch at all. The gentle hum of the engines plus the scenery moving by are our two hints that we're moving.

Steve and I took a tour of the wheelhouse by the Captain (Master in India) and into the engine room. Here's a photo for Dorothy and Marc.



The engine room was really cool to see, but it was REALLY REALLY LOUD and the people working there had no ear protection. When we got out we asked the guy giving us the tour about it and he said, "oh they usually do wear ear protection" but behind him one of the workers was shaking his head mouthing the words, "no we don't!" Oh well.



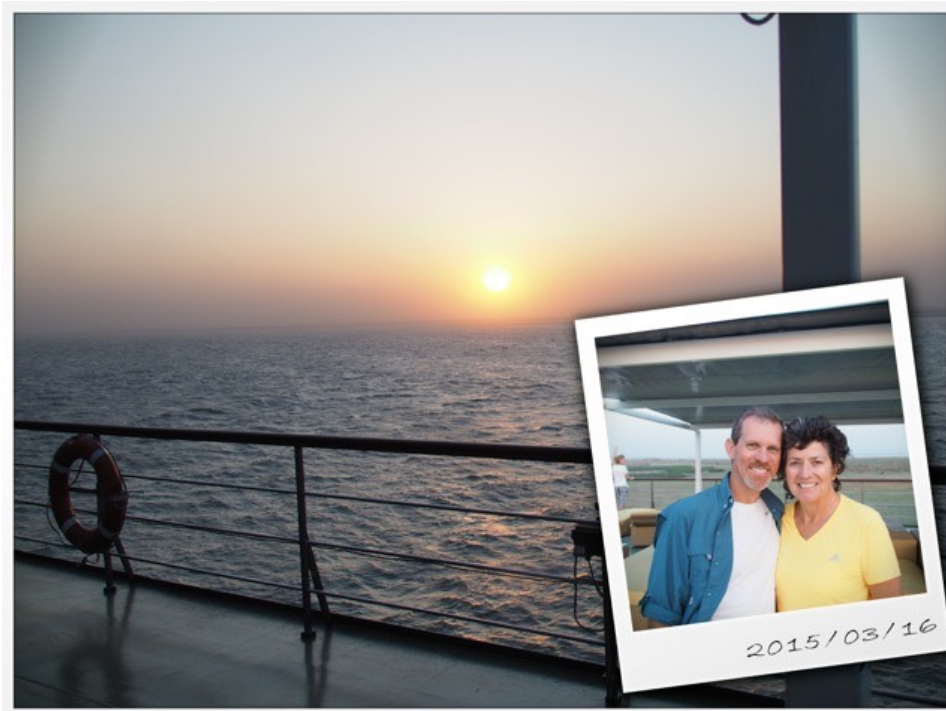
We continue to be fascinated by the people who rush to see us:



We worry about them though because the sand bar is continuously eroding away. Wish I could send a video to show you how suddenly giant chunks of the river bank will simply fall away, and yet they stand on the very edge.



Haven't included a gratuitous selfie in a while so here's an artsy fartsy one:



A big wind came in in the afternoon that caused a sandstorm so we were forced indoors for the evening. The next day we had to have yoga on the back deck. Nina is the cruise director (although she pretends she's given over the reigns to Neilu) and gives us our yoga instruction. She's not got the best sense in the world I'm afraid. She made everyone stare into the sun and made us do yoga on the deck right where the engine noise is the loudest so it was really hard to hear. We had fun anyway, and here's proof that Steve came to yoga too!



The water was positively glassy that day (the sandstorm day was really choppy but again the boat never jiggled). The water gave us fabulous reflections:



We went under one of only 3 bridges that span the Brahmaputra River. I know, Bill, I should have paid attention to the name...



Can't get enough of these fishing boats:



Our bandwidth here is a single satellite connection with ten Mac/iPhone fanatic people (plus anyone else who wants on line) so I'm chopping the stories shorter than I normally would. There are some good ones coming up, can't wait to tell you about them!

## **Installment 15 - Tea and Jute, But Why is the Gin Gone?**

I know you won't listen to a thing I say if I don't explain about the gin first. We had a crisis on board when we realized that every one of the women loves their (double) gin and tonics, and the men started drinking them too. We drank ALL of the gin they had on board. Reminded me of our first sailing trip Steve and I took to Santa Cruz Island with my mom and dad where we drank all the gin in the first 4 days and had to resort to vodka! On this trip, we were lucky enough that Jacques had stowed a giant bottle of Tanqueray 10 in his luggage...but we drank all of that too.

We had to drink the (mostly dreadful) wine they have on board. It was a bad night so we went to bed early. The next day we queried our guides about this important issue and they explained that Bombay Gin is actually made in England, and it was stuck in customs! We soldiered on...but there might have been some whining. And no, it wasn't JUST me doing the whining.

We made landfall at a village called Silghat. In Silghat they have Tea Gardens and a Jute factory (so a very upscale place compared to where we've been). Rally, Steve, and I decided to walk into the village while everyone else was milling about getting ready to go in cars, and a lovely man named Radish went with us (he's the food and beverage executive but was really wanted to get off the boat himself). As we walked we found out that it was only about a mile and a half to the tea gardens where they were going to drive us so we decided to just keep walking. It felt good to stretch our legs after 2 weeks of lethargy! I don't think Nina was very happy with our decision but we were willing to live with that.

Steve keeps wanting to touch the farm animals - here he is with a little baby cow. Yes, Merlee, I DO stop him before he pets them.



Ryan - I have no idea what this flower is but it came in flaming pink too!



The tea gardens were really beautiful as we walked:



Along our way we found the women picking the tea. The tea plants (mini trees?) are the perfect height for them to pull off the

smallest leaves and put them into their baskets. They put folded towels on their heads and support these 5 kg (11 lb) baskets from the rope over the top of their heads!



Aren't they gorgeous?



After their tea baskets are weighed, which determines how much they get paid, they dump their tea into these crates.



The women were very friendly, as they got onto their bus. They were waving enthusiastically at us and even blowing us kisses. They seemed very happy, and not in a “perform for the tourists” kind of way. They were giggling and laughing (probably at us).



After that we walked back to an area where young children performed an energetic dance for us, hitting sticks together to the beat of a tribal drum:



We agreed to take the car back (by that time we'd actually walked 4 miles according to my trusty Fitbit). On the way back, they took

us to the Jute factory. Here's a photo of a truck carrying raw jute to the factory (it's the stripped bark I think):



We were advised to wear masks over our faces in the Jute factory (and you'll see why):



Durgesh (our naturalist and main guide) explained that we'd be seeing a LOT of manual labor and that the government had consciously decided not to automate it because it would mean the loss of so many jobs. There are also cheaper materials for making what are essentially burlap bags, but again the government pays the higher price to the workers to keep them employed. Not sure how sustainable that is, but so far it seems to be working.

Walking through this factory we couldn't help but think of Dave (DeFrank) taking us through a textile mill in the US and thinking how much he would have liked seeing this (and being terrified by it). They strip the jute in giant machines that then make it into thick thread. It's terrifying because the workers are sticking their hands into the machines as they go flying by. The places is REALLY loud (we had cotton for our ears) and super dusty. The weaving machines were the most terrifying from a big scale:



And on the small scale clearly the sewing machine were the winners of the most terrifying contest award. Steve couldn't get

over how close the man's fingers were to this constantly flying needle, and of course the man couldn't see a thing with the jute fibers everywhere!



It was a fascinating and enjoyable day, and we all went to bed early because a) we had a wake up call for 3 am the next day for the safari, and b) there wasn't any gin left, so really, what's the point?

## Installment 16: Three Breakfasts, Elephants, Rhinos, and Gin

You'll be glad to know that our terrifying ordeal with the loss of gin was finally resolved. Below you can see the bartender Rajish and Food and Beverage Executive Ajith proudly displaying two of the tree bottles of Bombay Sapphire they had acquired. They assured us that more was on the way but we remain nervous. Please keep thinking good thoughts.



We went to bed quite early because we had a 3 am wakeup call for our drive to the Kaziranga National Park. We needed to leave as early as possible to hopefully see as many animals in the cool morning hours before they went back to sleep in the heat.

The Indian government has worked quite hard to preserve the animal life here. Kaziranga is home to 2,300 rhinos as a result of this preservation. The Brahmaputra river floods every single year, which causes the entire region to be under water. As a result the animals have to travel up into the hills to escape the flood. This is dangerous as there is a highway (Assam Highway 1, or AH1) that

they have to cross. This of course creates a conflict between cars and animals, so to try and stop injuries, the government instituted a timecard system for the cars to ensure they travel slowly through this region. At one point you get a time stamped card, and you'd better not arrive at the second check point before the time shown on the card. I thought this was ingenious.

Here's a shot of some "Salient Features of Kaziranga" (for Bill you know):



Another way they protect the animals is that poachers are shot and killed on sight. Seriously. The penalties for other infractions in this area seem quite lax, and often penalties are waved if you know someone who knows someone, but don't even THINK about going after one of the animals in the park.

On this morning we were given a small continental breakfast on the boat at 3:45 am (maybe even too early for Ken?) We drove in our cars to a gorgeous hotel, where they gave us a huge spread of breakfast with cappuccinos, omelettes made to order, mounds of fruit, and native Indian food to tide us over. When we came back from the safari to the boat...they gave us breakfast again since it was only 10am! You can bet the NEXT day there was a lot of complaining about how we only had ONE breakfast!

Ok, let's go to Kaziranga. It was so beautiful in the early morning light:



Jacques took this photo of us as we rode off on our elephant, Bitu, with our guide.



Our first amazing site was this wild boar. You might not think she's very interesting looking, but look closely between her legs. She has three tiny baby boars under her that look like tiny little deer fawns with stripes on their backs. They moved like birds they were so tiny - maybe 8 inches long!



We were really hoping to see rhinos, and boy did we see rhinos!



And then we found a baby rhino! Durgesh told us the baby is only 45 days old. Barbara is quite upset with Don because he won't let her bring back a baby rhino to their home in Liverpool. Maybe it was the lack of gin that made them so testy on the subject...



The rhinos were so close to us that I actually had to zoom back with my lens!



Can't get enough of the baby!



At one point we'd seen so many rhinos and they were on both sides of us that Steve was singing, "Rhinos to the left of me, rhinos to the right, here I am...!"

We saw water buffalo but I didn't get a great shot of them (stay tuned for a later installment on a water safari though). To tide you over, here's a majestic, but ill-named Swamp Deer:



Rhinos evidently have very good bathroom habits, each rhino picks one spot and always goes there. The result is these giant dung heaps. From those spring beautiful pink flowering bushes called Dung Flowers and for some reason they are smoking in this area. Who else would send you a picture of rhino poop?



In addition to our grown up elephants on which we were riding, there were three baby elephants along as well. No, Don won't let Barbara have one of these either. The fiend.



At the end when we got off, we were allowed to spend some time with one of the elephants. I leaned my head towards her, and she moved in to touch me head to head. My mother and I used to do this and it reminded me so much of her. Odd thing to say an elephant reminded me of my mom, but there you go.



One more thing on the elephants, our drivers directed them with their bare feet!



Next we switched to a jeep tour and did more of a bird safari. I couldn't see nearly as well as the guides, and my photos are from so far away I won't bore you with them. We DID see a monitor lizard though!



I'll have to cut the day off here, because this 1.7MB email will take over 2 hours to send, but there's actually more to this day! Dorothy - that's why I can't put the dates on the emails. Oh, and because I've completely lost track of time!

## **Installment 17: Weaving Village...and Why is the TONIC Gone???**

You're not going to believe this, but immediately after they acquired the gin, and we had a couple of drinks, they announced the the tonic was gone. It was a nightmare. Dorothy has assured me that if we cruise on THEIR boat, they NEVER run out of gin, so maybe that's what we'll do next time.

This was a more dire situation than the great gin débâcle though. It turns out that there simply is no tonic in all of Assam. To recap, Assam is the region of India that is to the East of Bangladesh. We found out from Neena (cruise director and whose family owns Far Horizons that owns the boat) that to get the tonic that we did have, she had to have someone fly from Delhi carrying a case of tonic! It was nuts. I tried a straight up martini with Bombay Sapphire and it was dreadful. We tried the wine - it was dreadful. So, we went back to drinking Kingfisher Beer which was positively delightful. Not gin and tonics, but lovely in its own way.

I should warn you that the letters will be going downhill from here, nothing will compare to riding an elephant and seeing rhinos. I will soldier on but I won't be offended if you go outside and play. I've nearly lost the will to live anyway without the gin and tonics. All right then, let's get on with it, shall we?

I haven't showed you many (if any?) photos of the boat herself, the MV Mahabaahu. We were trundled off into the "tenders" and taken to shore, but they did a spin about the boat so we could see her in her natural surroundings. I've helpfully shown you our room:



She looks a bit of a barge from the outside but she's lovely inside. It was noted (I forget by whom) that I neglected to include the obligatory photo of Steve lounging on the bed upon our arrival:



We were taken to a village called Buswanath Ghat (ghat appears to mean a place where boats can bring passengers). In Buswanath Ghat the women weave the most amazing fabrics.

They use manually-powered looms that are fantastic to watch. They have two foot pedals that move half the threads up at a time (alternating) and they have a rope the whip back and forth that shoots the shuttle through between the threads, and then they grab a horizontal bar to pull the row snug. It's fantastic to watch (again I wish I had the bandwidth for video!) but here are a few photos that might show how it works.

Grant - Dad SO would have gone home and built one!



Closeup of the shuttle that slides back and forth between the two rows of threads:



We walked to the small temple, and there the women positively swarmed us trying to convince us to buy one of their shawls. You can see Steve's hat on the far right trying to escape the bedlam, and several of our party are buried in the middle. Several from our group came out with scarfs, shawls and skirts and were happy with their purchases.



The homes here are pretty upscale compared to some of the places we've been. We've definitely noticed that our frame of reference has changed!



We find it entertaining how many satellite TV dishes there are here. I'm not sure the dust on this one is enhancing the signal?



As with everywhere we've been the people are very friendly, especially the children. We were told that if you take a photo and then show it to them they'd love it, and that was always true.



We walked through the town and came upon a lovely jetty with beautiful views.



We've only seen sand for so long that we were fascinated by the sight of large rocks and boulders on the river bank!



More kids!



I ALMOST escaped the island without buying from the weaving women but I finally fell prey to them. You had to admire how hard they worked weaving in the first place and secondly how they worked to sell their products. I decided I owed it to them...plus it was really pretty. My pals thought it was hilarious that I finally bought something and started up a round of applause to mock me and the local ladies joined in!



No rhinos, no elephants, no tigers, but we really enjoyed the weaving village anyway!

## **Installment 18: Boat Safari and a Tiger, AKA Day Two Without Tonic**

Our long nightmare continues as the food and beverage executive searches for tonic. We're a dismal bunch but making the best of it.

The days have been more relaxing with long stretches of our gentle ride up the Brahmaputra River watching the sandbars go by. I did some metrics with my Fitbit - it's 367 steps round trip from our room to the dining room, and that's about all we do. Molly (who is pregnant and very hungry) asked if I'd talk about the food a bit. I haven't taken photos because it isn't that kind of food. It's not elegant looking but as my Australian friends like to say, "it's lovely" which means amazingly tasty! We haven't had a single dish twice on the entire trip. The one mainstay food we've had is the naan flat bread and it's scrumptious - we eat it with every meal. Neon says you can go 100 days without a repeat in India. Several of us say that we could become vegetarians in India because the things they make out of cottage cheese alone (called paneer here) are fantastic. I hate cottage cheese, by the way. The spices are so flavorful, perhaps too spicy for some of you but I think it's all fantastic. Except for this one really weird-tasting crème brûlée they made one night that everyone agreed was just awful. Dorothy will be happy to know that I'll have put on at LEAST five pounds by the time I get back.

Our trusty naturalist Durgesh took us on a boat safari in one of the tenders. He loves birds and could spot things I couldn't even see with my telephoto lens at 300mm! Here's an example of a Kingfisher taken with a 300mm lens:



Can you see him? How about if I crop it close for you?



I often pretended to see things just because he was so happy to show them to us and I didn't want to disappoint him!

Remember when I showed you the wild water buffalo earlier and I said, "you ain't seen nuthin' yet"? We got up close and personal with one on the boat safari:



And then Durgesh spotted this one just with his horns out of the water:



He was nice enough to get up out of the water to pose for us:



He seemed rather upset that, as Wendy said, we had disturbed his morning ablutions so he trundled up the hill in disgust:



I actually could see these two Pied Kingfishers. Makes me want a beer now.



And they call this a snake bird - you can just barely make out his beak to the far right on a tiny, slender neck. In the water you can just see the snake-like neck/beak combo coming out of the water:



And a White-throated Kingfisher. Now you tell me why the white-throated one is a Pied, but the blue one is white-throated???



After we got back to the boat, we were watching an impossibly boring cooking demonstration (the others seemed enraptured and were taking notes so maybe it was just me) when one of the navigators pounded on the window of the dining room yelling TIGER!!!

We rushed up to the top deck, cameras and binoculars flailing about our necks and began searching the shoreline. Remember how hard it was to see the Kingfisher? It was WAY harder to even find what they were looking for. THIS is my picture:



With my naked eyes I did see a whitish spot right there but Durgesh was scanning frantically with his binoculars and suddenly yelled, "YES!!! DEFINITELY TIGER!!!" He and Jacques both got photos that confirmed it was a tiger out there, Steve saw it with the binoculars and he handed them to me and there he was, getting up and turning around and walking back into the bush.

Jacques managed to get a photo right as he walked away:



Even though he was so very much farther away than the tiger in Ranthambore, this was such a natural setting, and the pure joy on Durgesh's face for the rest of the night made it much more special than the first one. We were so happy we almost forgot about the tonic.

I'll leave you with a photo of Durgesh as the sun was setting and he was still scanning the area for the tiger:



Oh - one more thing. Remember how I told you the first night they actually lowered the bar over to the beach for us for a cocktail party? They do that nearly EVERY night. It's just as magical and amazing every time.



## Installment 19: Mishing Village, AKA Day Three without Tonic

Several of you told me that I sent the last message twice, and I believe you but it was some glitch caused by our itchy bitsy bandwidth. To give you a sense of scale, at home my bandwidth is over 6,000 KiloBytes per second (think of it as how much water you can shove through a hose per second.) On the ship, the BIGGEST number I saw was 14KB/sec. So yeah, we're doing what we can here, sufferin', sufferin' bad...

Even though we're still out of tonic, we made the effort for the staff of the Mahabaahu to pretend that we were still having fun.

At 7am Steve and I struck out with our trusty naturalist Durgesh for a morning walk along the sand bar. It looks like we're on the moon or something with nothing in sight. The islands have a strange beauty about them though.



But we did run into civilization of a sort:



And there was a plant. I liked my shadow in this photo:



The ship looked pretty from the shore:



When we got back, it was time to dash off to the Mishing Village. We've gotten very used to putting on our life vests.



When we first came to shore, Durgesh's eagle eye caught these goats waiting for the bus:



The Mishing Village people build their houses up on stilts, and the floors are made of bamboo slats. I still can't figure out why people let us traipse through their homes (I suppose they're paid but it's still weird). This woman looks a bit skeptical of the whole operation:



Here's one of the houses on stilts:



And here's the podfeet standing inside on the bamboo slats



And when I looked down I found baby piggies! One of them looks a bit like the Alien from the movies though, doesn't she?



And Steve pointed out their power source (in one of the bedrooms):



Here's a view of their kitchen. For us it seemed really hard to walk around on these slats but it seemed very comfortable for them.



I have to say young and old all seemed skeptical:





We left the houses to walk to the local school, and on the way their we were descended upon by the children (none of whom were a BIT skeptical):



Durgesh explained to us that about 4 years ago, the government of India declared education a human right. That means in India school is 100% free, including tuition, books and uniforms, up through grade 10. To make sure girls take advantage of it, they get free bikes to ride to school. I think I mentioned in a previous installment that the literacy rate has skyrocketed in the past few years as a result.

Durgesh told us that we absolutely should take photos of the kids (and adults) and recommended that we show the photos we took of them. They're funny about photos - SUPER serious when you're taking the photo and then when you show it to them they break out in laughter. They LOVE photos.



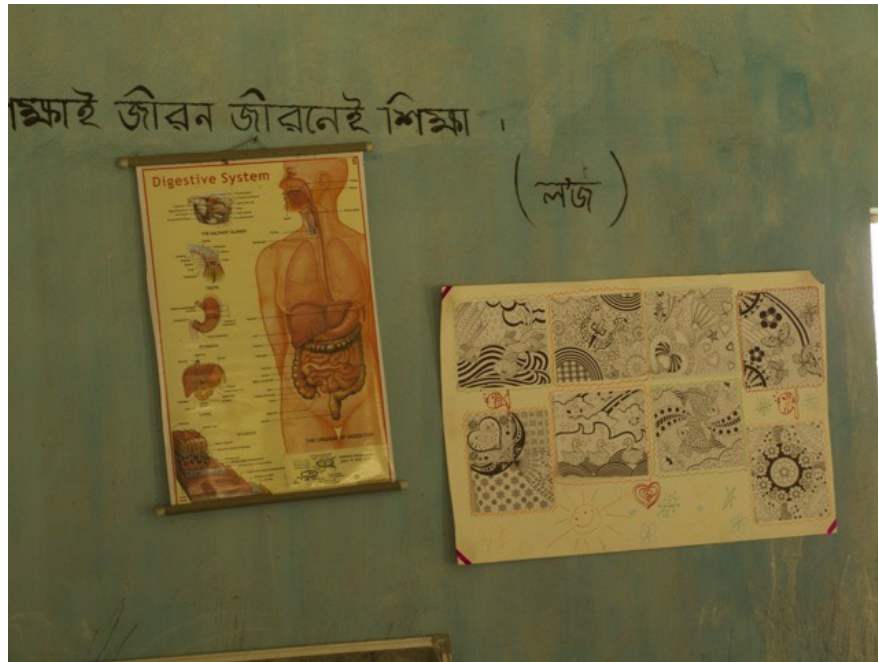


While I was photographing people, Steve was still trying to touch farm animals:



I think visiting the school was one of my favorite things we did. The kids were super excited that we were there. We got a few shots of the classroom for Cheyenne (she's a teacher) before the kids came in.





Again, I PROMISE these kids were laughing and pointing and enjoying the photo after I took it:



Caught one accidentally forgetting to look grim in the photo



The boys were awesome. Look at these faces:



We went outside the classroom and the local women had brought out their weaving, just like the weaving village. They were a bit of a swarm but since I wasn't buying I was able to be relatively free from it:



My FAVORITE person all day was this woman who came up to me and said, "LOOK OUT!" and then snatched my hat off my head, plopped it on her own head and demanded I take a photo of her!



But you have to love how a bunch of the boys decided to be cool and hang out with Steve. He says they're his homies:



You can tell I'm writing this in the future because of how many photos I was able to attach, hope I didn't overdo it for you! No? You don't think it's too much? Ok, how about one more adorable child?



After the Mishing Village, the crew insisted that we dress in traditional Mishing clothing for our cocktail party on the beach. We decided to call all of the clothing Saris because we could never remember the correct names. The top and bottom halves are called two different things, and the boys skirt thingy is completely different from what the girls wear. Anyway, I thought Durgesh and Steve looked quite dashing:



Somehow this photo says “typical cruise photo” to me...



I'll close out this action-packed missive with a photo for Lindsay and Nolan and Kyle. We've had to go back to Kingfisher beer because of the tonic crises of 2015, and we didn't realize that it was Kingfisher "Strong" at first. It's 8% alcohol!



## Installment 20: Ramayana Play, Tea Garden, and Tonic!

I would like to thank all of you for your concern about the gin and later tonic débâcle, especially Dorothy and Lilly who both sent photos of their gin and tonics, Mike and Millie who had Bombay Sapphire gin and tonics just for us, and Rod who not only sent a photo of his gin and tonic, it was the FIRST gin and tonic in his life that he drank just for our benefit. Here's Rajish proudly showing off the newly acquired tonic (Steve would've preferred Canada Dry, but we're not being picky at this point):



All was right with the world and we slept (quite) soundly.

In the morning we struck off to see two things, the Ramayana Play and the Tea Garden on the island of Majuli. At one time Majuli was thought to be the largest inhabited river island in the world, but then Google Maps came along and ruined that record. I think it's still the 2nd largest. The island used to be 1250 square km, but because of the natural erosion caused by the Brahmaputra River, it is down to only 422 square km. It's kind of sad to know that the entire thing will eventually be washed away.

Durgesh had told us that water hyacinth is a plague on their waterways. Some genius introduced it and it's unfortunately thriving and choking the rivers. On our drive he pointed out women in the water clearing it. Look how much there is, and how tiny they are in comparison to what they have to do! Pretty much all of the green in the foreground is the water hyacinth. He did explain that they're also fishing so I guess that's a bonus to the job at hand?



Steve found a couple of geese to hang out with...



The story of Ramayana is fading a bit in my memory but what I can recall is it's the story of a woman who is afraid of an evil spirit guy, sends her brother after him, and when the brother doesn't come back, sends her husband in. The husband comes back but then reveals himself as the bad guy. An epic battle occurs.

But before the play started, this ornately attired guy danced for us:



Here's a picture of the band...



Then these five women came out and danced for us, reenacting the 10 reincarnations of Krishna. Or at least that's what I think they were doing, I know they were a fish at one point.





The girls were nice but the play was AWESOME. Here's the brother and husband:



But the best character was the evil king!



And just for Diane, the woman was guarded by...Holy Monkees!



The evil king had bad guys on his team too, with awesome faces:



But things weren't looking so good for the evil king:



And the fatal blow was struck:



They agreed to pose with us after the performance.



Possibly my favorite photo of the bunch is this one of our buddy Rally. He started doing the same hysterical creepy laugh as the king, so the king gave Rally his crown!



You can sure tell I've got good bandwidth while writing this, can't you?

Below is the Luit River which was formed by an earthquake that made Majuli an island. The riverbank behind the play was beautiful and evidently it's a major transportation method. Even by bicycle!



Now all of you who mocked me for my Ranger Rick vest - check this out. Durgesh has the SAME Podfeet vest! He looks snarly in this photo but he insisted I wear my vest this day and pose in this specific location because he thought it was funny too.



Next up we went to a monastery on Majuli Island. Young boys around five years old are sent to the monastery to become celibate monks. I asked why a parent would do that to their child, and it was explained that if you are poor and have a pile of kids, at least the parents know their kids will be fed and clothed by sending them to the monastery. The good news is that at some point (around 9 years old) the child gets to decide whether to stay and become a monk for the rest of his life or to leave. Imagine making that decision at age 9.

The monks' prayers (and it would be great if I could remember the religion, maybe Hindu?) are done through song and dance, and getting boys young to learn the complex dances is crucial. The dance/prayers will go on for 4 or 5 hours! For us they only played for about 15 minutes.

It is common that you have to take off your shoes to go into temples, but luckily our keepers give us these fine-looking booties. Here's Barbara and me showing them off:



Here are the monks performing their song and dance:



After that we went to a tea garden and plantation that has been in the same family for 150 years. They employ 500 women to pick the tea, collecting 500,000 kg of tea a year. Not sure why but they have this huge tree house on the property. We're sitting in a chair carved out of the tree itself:



You'd think this was the entire day but at this point there was an option to continue on to see three more monuments (1.5 hours drive each way), or go back to the boat. We gladly chose to relax on the boat! When the other people got back they were exhausted and said we made the right choice. Cool monuments but grueling drives and a bit terrifying as the second drive was in the dark. Driving in India is terrifying enough without doing it in the dark.

Here's what we did instead - think we made the right choice?



Public Service Announcement:

You will continue receiving installments well after we get home because these are being written a few days after each adventure.

I'm not sure how many more there will be, maybe five more.  
Didn't want you to get confused...

## Installment 21: Last Day on the Brahmaputra + Calcutta

Just listened to the SMR Podcast hosted by our good friends Rod Simmons, Chris Ashley, and Robb Dunewood and got a big kick about how they talked about THESE letters on the show! Evidently they aren't bored yet and seem to enjoy it, so I'm afraid I'm going to power through these to the end!

It was our last day on the Brahmaputra river, and when we woke up, the crew was looking at something out in the water, so we went out with them and saw Ganges River Dolphins. They only exist in the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers and are like Pacific dolphins but with really long and skinny snouts. Even Durgesh said he's only gotten distant blurry photos of these dolphins, so I was pretty happy to capture this one shot:



On our very last morning on the Brahmaputra, Durgesh said he'd do a 7am walk and Neena would do Yoga on the sand. Rally made it to Yoga every single day, and Wendy went almost every day (and said it loosened her up really well!) I like this shot with the modern tender that took them over in the foreground and the classic

native boat in the background. By the way, the two gentlemen in black pants and white shirts are paramedics! That sounds silly but they were there every day.



Steve and I chose to go on the nature walk and were delighted to once again have Durgesh to ourselves. Here's a shot from the boat of the path we were going to take:



Durgesh and me on the walk:



Durgesh was super bummed about his camera though. He has a Nikon D90, and he'd noticed some spots on his sensor, so he flipped the mirror up to clean the sensor (a task I won't even do) but then the mirror wouldn't go back down. That was a disaster

since he's the photographer on the boat and sells his photographs. On our walk he just started grabbing my camera, so I won't pretend all of these are mine! Durgesh would be mortified to see how few names I can remember of the birds I can remember here.

This one is a bird, and it's blue:



Check out the size of the termite mounds here - this thing is around 4 feet tall. Makes our termite problem in California look mild!



Durgesh told me the name of this one about 26 times. It's black and has a split tale. And a cool name.



I call this one yellow and black bird. Indians probably call it the green toed something or other because the names never match what they look like.



I remember this one - these are FRUIT BATS!



Now, I said the holy monkeys were for Diane, but now there are OWLS for Diane - two different owls!



For the entire trip I kept seeing these Tiger Striped Butterflies and they would NEVER land, but finally on that last day I got this picture. I knew Bart would like it (he takes amazing butterfly and moth photos) so I even wrote the name down when Durgesh told it to me.



It was sad to see the MV Mahabaahu go, it had been a lovely home for seven days. But we couldn't rest on our laurels, we had to keep moving. I didn't know how we'd be flying out when I made the diagram (our travel agent was very mysterious about it). Jet Air, the economy airline we used for all of our inter-India flights, is REALLY efficient in many ways. For example, if everyone is on board early, they simply leave! We left 15 minutes early one time. Crazy. But they flew us from Jorhat (where the boat stopped) to Calcutta with a stop in Guwahati. Half the passengers got off, so they had to go through every piece of carry-on luggage and say, "whose bag is this?" and if someone didn't own up to it, it had to leave.

We haven't given you a good selfie in a while - here's Steve and me about to board the plane to Calcutta:



And we haven't had a photo of Steve showing off the hotel room for a while! This is the Swissotel in Calcutta. We were all VERY sad we were just staying one night here!



The view of the infinity pool at the top of the hotel was amazing with the city of Calcutta in the background:



We ran out to do some quick shopping before convening for drinks and we found an Apple Premium Reseller!



So you KNOW what I had to do...



After shopping we finally got to have a drink in the bar with our friends. We had REAL wifi for the first time in a week and you should have seen the exuberance. I remember at one point Jacques did a high five with me because he'd actually done an app update on his iPhone!!! It's great traveling with fellow geeks.

Steve and I took this photo of us finally getting some gin and tonics at the Swissotel bar just so we could text it to the kids:



We texted it to them, and Lindsay and Nolan texted back their own toast:



And then Kyle texted back HIS toast. This is refinery waste water... he says it's clean (I wouldn't drink it).



And then he told Luke about it who is working in Noyabrsk in Siberia, Russia right now so LUKE toasted back!



I managed to make a giant letter out of “we went on a nature walk, flew on a plane, had more gin”, but you can blame the SMR Podcast guys for encouraging me!

## Nepal

### Installment 22: First Day in Nepal

We left Calcutta (or Kolkata as written in India) at the “crack of doom” as my father always said, with a wakeup call at 3 am. That was so that we could fly from Calcutta to Delhi and then cool our heels there for FIVE HOURS before our flight to Kathmandu, Nepal. In the Delhi airport, we found the Get Smart Cone of Silence!





And for the geeks reading along, you know I love a good Windows crash on a public system more than just about anyone, so we captured this screenshot of the in flight entertainment crashing. And then we noticed, it was Red Hat LINUX, not Windows! Unjustly accused!



We loved our hotel in Kathmandu, the Dwarika's Hotel, named after the hotel's founder. The Dwarika's is known for its efforts in cultural preservation and looks as if built several hundred years ago when in fact it is a modern 5-star hotel, although it took 30 years to construct. The intricate teak carvings and old-style Nepali architecture got us in the mood to explore the city.

Here's the classic photo of Steve in our room:



And this is the view from the lobby. This is NOT a street, everything you see is hotel rooms:



The door locks reminded us of when you go to a gas station and ask for the key to the bathroom. They were huge, and the locks made so much noise they woke up everyone in the hotel every time you opened it!



Every single one of us separately thought the stairwell reminded us of the Big Bang Theory:



Ok, enough fun, how about some cultural stuff now?

We embarked on a tour through the roads and side streets of Kathmandu guided by our knowledgeable tour-guide Indira (Steve kept wanting to call her Gandhi, the only Indira he knows by name, but resisted). We experienced road side bazaars, temples and the many sights, sounds and smells of Kathmandu. Steve really enjoyed seeing the different people, culture and religious ceremonies up close.

We visited several Hindu temples around the city, each unique but reflecting a common theme of domes and intricate carvings. In one of the temples we watched a ritual performed by several Hindu monks called the Homa. The ritual involves the monks using incense, fire, chants, musical instruments as they honor their god of destruction, Shiva, the third god of the Hindu triumvirate. Steve was fascinated by the ceremony.



When we first got started, we saw this rather disturbing dog. He was pathetic looking but seemed to like us:



We saw a fantastic bazaar that I really wanted to buy from but our guide ASSURED me we'd come back by it later (she lied). Steve got this awesome photo from the top of one of the temples:



Here are a few views from other temples in Kathmandu. The woman on the ladder is actually WEEDING the temple. I have no idea how weeds are growing out of the structure.



When we came out of this area, the dog was there again like he was waiting for us!



A proud Nepali. As soon as this guy spotted us tourists, he ran over to pick up a Nepali flag and began waving it around with gusto.



In possibly the creepiest thing we heard about other than that gruesome little girl at the nobel house in Jaipur, we learned about the “Living Goddesses”. Get this. They select young girls (5-8 years old) who have 32 virtues. These virtues include black hair, dark eyes, skin that has no blemishes like pock marks, and no blood having ever left their bodies. When they have a good contestant to become a living goddess, they put the little girl in a room with the heads of 108 sacrificed water buffalos. For the night. I’m not kidding. If in the morning the little girl has no problems (crying, screaming) then she becomes a living goddess. She is called The Kumari.

Here’s Steve and Barbara walking into the area where she lives. The top middle window is where she actually looked out at us. We were forbidden to photograph her but it would probably give you the same nightmares we had after hearing the story and seeing her stare down at us with an unmoving expression from the window.



Steve appreciating a temple view:



I found it fascinating that there is a distinct border between the part of the city built in the 14th century (brick building below) and the 18th century (white building below):



How about one more holy monkee for Diane?



With some fire ritual out in front of it:



I was REALLY tempted to buy one of these Apple purses:



Ok, I'm not kidding, the dog was there AGAIN!



I just love the networks here!



We left the temple area and went to a fabulous restaurant called the Garden of Dreams. They had awesome Everest Beer (a little hint of events to come), which was actually in used Kingfisher Bottles:



That's enough for now!

## **Installment 23: Kathmandu day 1.5**

I forgot a couple of things at the end of Installment 22. After our day touring in Kathmandu, our guide Indira gave us the option to visit the Pashupatinath Hindu Temple in the afternoon or just hang out at the hotel to relax. She said Pashupatinath is one of the few temples in Nepal where bodies are cremated according to Hindu custom. Wow! that sounded like FUN! Well, not to me, but Steve seemed to have a morbid curiosity about the whole process, so he proceeded with another 6 from our group to the temple. I'll let Steve tell you about it:

Pashupatinath turned out to be a collection of temples and ashrams that were constructed over many years dating back to 400 A.D., all located on the banks of the sacred Bagmati River in Kathmandu. This makes it convenient to dump the ashes of the cremated bodies directly into the Bagmati River where they will eventually flow to the Ganges River, the most sacred of all Hindu rivers. [Editorial from Allison: the sacred rivers are the worst looking because they're full of dead people!]

On the walk to the temple complex we saw the colorful powdered dyes used in Hindu religious ceremonies and artwork.



Here's a photo of cremations being carried out on a couple of the several platforms that are erected for that purpose on the banks of the Bagmati River.



Looking through a series of arched buildings that parallel the river for a few hundred feet. They are adorned with gargoyles to protect the sacred places at Pashupatinath.



One of the characteristics of the Pashupatinath Temple complex is the high number of Macaque monkeys that live in the area. I just can't get enough monkeys, so here are several shots of them in their (not so natural) habitat.



No wonder the monkeys hang out here - they're being fed!



Wally called these guys "Biker Monkeys". Who knew?



During many portions of our trip in Nepal, we were cautioned not to approach Macaque monkeys since they can inflict a serious bite. I experienced one incident near the temple when I walked toward a monkey sitting on the wall to within a distance of about 10 ft to take a photo. I got very nervous when the monkey faced me, made the face shown below, jumped down from the wall, and

began walking toward me! I quickly walked away from the monkey toward the bank of the river and the monkey kept coming after me. I then took a quick turn to walk parallel to the river and the monkey simply jumped down the river embankment. In retrospect I think the monkey was actually just walking to the river, not after me, but I was a bit more cautious after the incident. [Allison editorial - makes me wish for the days when he was just petting farm animals!]



Allison here again. Now do you get why I decided to go to the pool? Which one would you have chosen?



More installments to come!

## Installment 24: Himalayas!

For our very last day of actual fun in Nepal, we took a plane ride up to see the Himalayas. While I wasn't sad I'd missed the cremations, I was bummed to have missed the monkeys, but luckily there were monkeys, climbing around right next to the airport:



We flew on Yeti Airlines, which is just fun to say - but Steve liked the added bonus that they have a podfoot on their logo:



Our flight was supposed to be at 6:30am, but the flight was delayed about an hour. At first we saw on the signage that they were waiting for the weather to be clear up at the mountains but then they told us that they had to clear birds from the runway! We looked out and sure enough, a whole bunch of uniformed folks were running along the runway in a straight line to get the birds to leave. Crazy.

Here's us about to board the plane. I know it was tiny, Diane, but it was to go to the Himalayas!!!



We saw a lot of really cool mountains out the window:



But the one you've all been waiting for - Mount Everest!!!



Yeti did this trip right. Everyone had their own window seat. While the left side was seeing all the mountains, the right side got to go up into the cockpit to see that view (one at a time). When the

right side was seeing the view, the left side got the cockpit view.  
My favorite part of the cockpit was noticing that we had two female pilots:



I love this photo - it's Steve with his GoPro in silhouette with Mount Everest out the window:



Speaking of doing it right, after we had all seen Mount Everest, they served us champagne!



I told Steve he didn't REALLY see Mount Everest:



We LOVED this - so exciting and amazing to see the highest mountain in the world.

## Installment 25: Bhaktapur City & Boudhanath Stupa

I have to admit that I didn't enjoy the temples and shopping in Nepal on the first day but that all changed on the second day. Where the first day was REALLY crowded and the street vendors really PUSHY, on the second day it was calm and peaceful and I really loved it. Some nutty stuff but still really cool.

We went to Bhaktapur (at least I gleaned that from this sign). Look there's a URL so you can read up on it yourself!



While we rarely found people doing absolutely nothing in India, I did find a few people napping in Nepal. I don't know why but I've always had a fascination with photographing people asleep. I found the very first photos I took as a child and about 1/3 are of my dad asleep.



We walked through narrow alleyways filled with shops with interesting things.



I found the marionettes particularly creepy:



Steve was really mad that he couldn't get up high enough to try and pet this rooster:



There were several shops with these amazing beads - so colorful:



I probably should have asked what these beads were about but I would have forgotten by now so there's that. I thought they looked cool:



Ooh - I know this one - it's like a temple, or a monument, or something. That's Steve in front of it:



One of the monument/temple/somethings had a series of creatures up the sides of the stairs - I liked these guys.



The Hindus really like to have animals in their temples (that's how you can tell they're not Muslim by the way). I'm guessing you're sad we haven't had a selfie in quite a while, right?



I love this photo of me and Wendy at the “Golden Gate”. The reason I love it is because of Wally on the right. He sees the world differently from the rest of us and seems to often be pointed in the opposite direction from the typical tourists (like us). He gets much more interesting photos and angles as a result.



We went to another temple thing, and they had a cobra snake pond thing there. Not sure of the significance (bet Indira told us). That’s Wally again, this time inside taking photos:



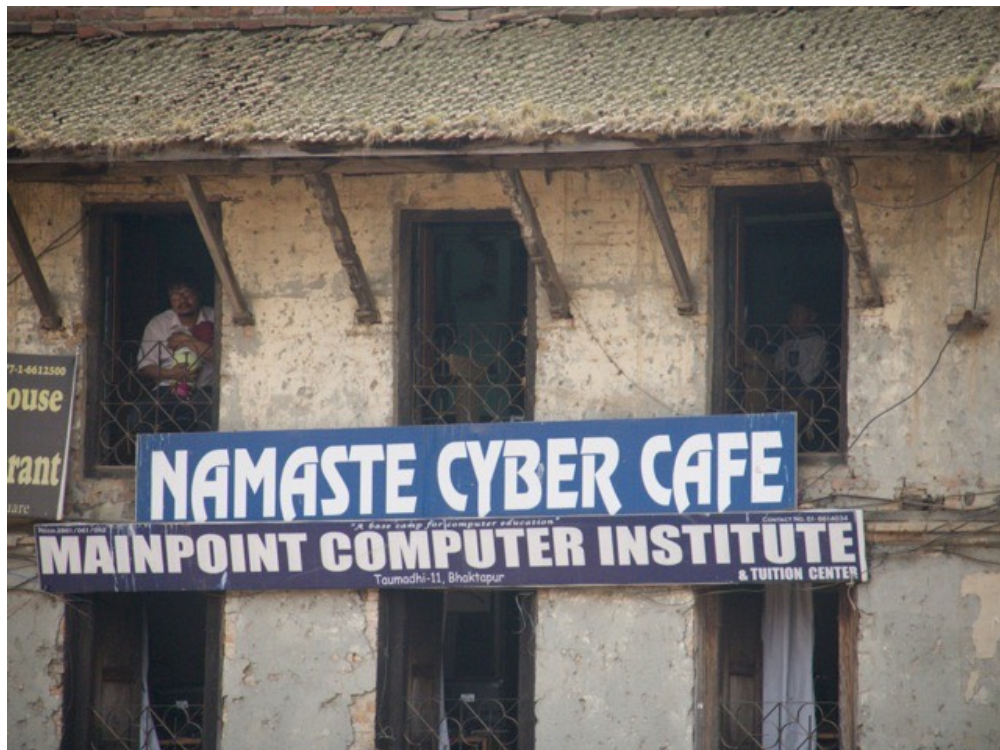
what I enjoyed more was this little kid who came up and indicated that I REALLY should take his photo:



He called his buddies over to show them his masterpiece on my camera at which point they all wanted in on the action. It's good to see that boys treat each other with dignity and respect all over the world.



I enjoy the juxtaposition of technology on the buildings here:



The day before we went on this tour when we flew to see the Himalayas, I took a photo from the plane of a HUGE structure that looked really unusual:



And on the tour we discovered that it was the Boudhanath Stupa, one of the largest spherical Buddhist stupas in all of Nepal. A Stupa is like a temple but is a solid, not hollow structure. Steve captured a short video of the flags waving around the Stupa that I think shows the expanse of this structure (if the aerial view didn't do that already):

And a closeup of the face on the Stupa:



The Buddhists have a lot of rituals they perform here. They use hollow metal cylinders with interesting designs on them and spin them when they walk past, they go into little structures with fire and all kinds of little photos and such, but they also do something odd with smoke. We watched them burning something awful smelling which we later on found out was a form of cedar.



In probably the weirdest ritual we saw, there was a woman with big bags of corn, who was I think selling them to people in bowls. The man in this video is holding the bowl of corn out to pigeons. No idea what this was about! Here's my favorite photo I captured:



Just to prove we're still engineers at heart, check out these weird tractors we saw all over this area. They look backwards, don't they? They made a terrible racket, sounded like a two-stroke engine to me.



This was the very last day of the fun part of our trip, so we made the waiter at our hotel get a shot of all of us at dinner. I normally don't like big group shot photos but I rather like this one.



You'll notice I said this was the last FUN day of our trip, there's one more installment to come - Getting Home! It was an adventure...

## **Installment 26: Finally Getting Home!**

This is the most number of vacation emails I've ever sent before but then again it was the longest and most interesting trip we've ever undertaken. Thanks for sticking with us throughout this adventure (you're still reading, right?)

Getting home turned out to be way more of an "adventure" than we would have hoped. The plan (if you go to Steps 12, 13 and 14 of your diagram) was to fly from Kathmandu to Delhi to Abu Dhabi to LA. Easy peasy, right? Well, even as described it was fraught with unknown dangers.

Remember early on I told you that (luckily) Rally noticed on the diagram that we'd actually be in the Delhi airport for 15 hours? Steve booked us a transit hotel in Delhi so we could sleep through some of that 15 hours. "Transit" will be important to the plot here so remember that word. Upon our original arrival in Delhi at the beginning of the trip, the representative of the travel agency we used booked us a reservation for that same night but at the Holiday Inn NEAR the airport. I explained that it would have been way better if they'd TOLD ME they'd made this reservation. I suggested that they cancel their hotel and we'd keep the one we had because a transit hotel means you're still inside the airport. The idea of hauling our luggage back and forth to one more hotel was more than I could bear. Negotiations ensued and I was refunded the cost of the extra hotel.

It turns out we dodged a HUGE bullet when I made the choice to stick with the transit hotel. Jacques is a pilot and we were chatting about how much "fun" our trip back would be. He remembered that we had a Single Entry Visa to India, and we already used up our one entry. That means we would be allowed to fly THROUGH Delhi, but not leave the Delhi airport. Had we chosen the travel

agent's hotel, we would never have been allowed to leave ... for 15 hours!

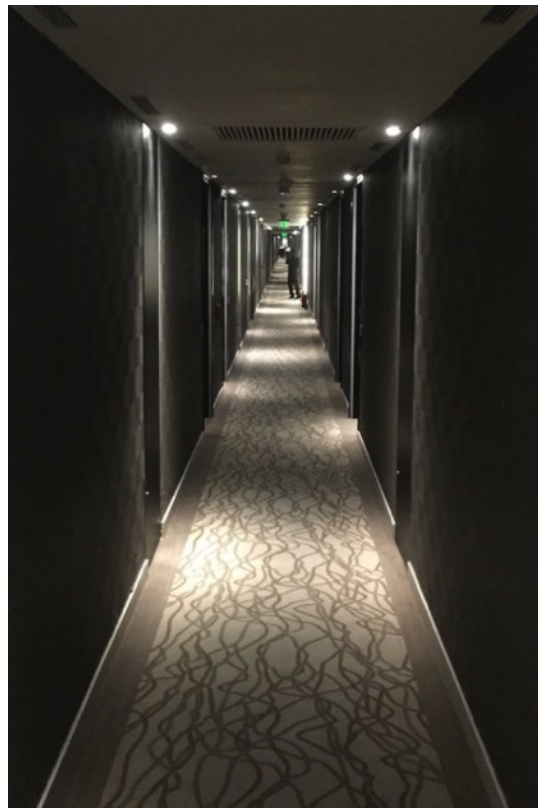
There's more to the story but that's a LOT of words without pictures so let's take a break from text. Steve was really enjoying watching the World Cup Cricket playoffs (India was up against Australia in the quarter finals) so when we arrived in the Delhi Airport we went to the Priority Access airport lounge (another benefit of the Platinum American Express Steve got us for free) to watch the match and have a gin and tonic! What else would you expect?



Jacques' wife Gabby suggested that when we got to the airport hotel we'd find out we were in those sleeping pods...and this sign got me worried she was right!



The transit hotel had the LONGEST hallway I've ever seen in a hotel. Seriously, I was convinced there was a mirror down there but it was all rooms in a straight line!



And I know you're waiting for it...one last shot of Steve lounging on the bed!



Jacques saved us one more time. When we were talking about the transit hotel, he explained to us that they would book our luggage all the way through from Kathmandu to Los Angeles, even though we were passing through two countries and changing airlines! We had no idea! If he hadn't told us that, we would have shown up at this hotel with no clean clothes or anything else! We packed a couple of tiny little bags with the bare essentials. Here's our "luggage" for our transit through the airports:



We still got to spend some quality time wandering the airport. If every other experience we had told us we weren't in Kansas any more, this sign in the airport does the trick:



This is right about the point where things went from hard to dreadful. All of our travel within India was on a budget airline called Jet Airways. Every single flight left on time, or even EARLY if they had everyone on board. I've never seen that before. Our big flights though were on Etihad Airlines, which is a high end, beautiful airline and we had (frequent flyer mile paid) business class seats.

Etihad booked our flights, and left us just a 1 hour and 35 minute gap from arriving in Abu Dhabi from Delhi to the departure of our flight from Abu Dhabi to LA. That wasn't too bright of them, because they CLOSE THE GATE an hour and a half before the flight!!! Our plane left really late from Delhi, but they made up a lot of time so we landed only 15 min late. I talked the flight attendants into letting us be the very first people off the plane and we sprinted to the transfer desk where we had to have our boarding passes printed.

Luckily we were in business so we got to go to the short line. That's where all luck ended. These jokers had printed STEVE'S boarding pass, but not mine, and then gave my ticket away! I've mentioned several times that we got the tickets via frequent flyer miles but that's not quite correct. The ONLY ticket we paid for with hard-earned dollars was the ONE THEY GAVE AWAY. I could NOT believe it.

The guy behind us told us that for him this was the FIFTH time they did it to him in this airport. RIDICULOUS.

So the lady behind the counter tries to call people to get me on the flight (they offered to let me fly economy but my brilliant husband suggests that this MIGHT not be a good idea). After trying to see if she could rebook us on a flight maybe through Chicago (we could have visited Dean and Suzanne and Barry!) she finally told us to just go wait in the airport lounge till someone came to talk to us.

I'll shorten the story a bit to tell you that it took them FIVE HOURS to figure out what to do with us. You can just IMAGINE how pleased we were with that. In the end, they rebooked us on the same flight a day later, put us up in a Hilton near the airport, drove us there and back and paid for our meals. They did what they could but the original mistake was just awful.

Here we are in the "limo" they sent for us (it was actually a Lexus ES350) but we were so happy that we finally had a plan that we were in good spirits.



You thought the Steve Lounging on Beds series was over, didn't you? I convinced him to do it one last time, but I have to say his heart wasn't really in it:



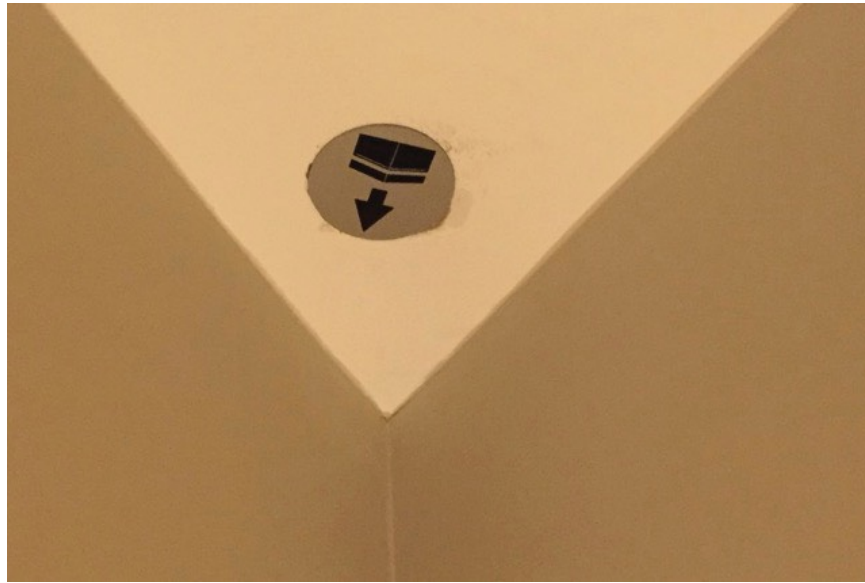
For a Hilton it wasn't bad. Note the pattern on the floor in our room matches this amazing hanging sculpture/mobile thingy in the giant two story lobby:



Being back in the UAE reminded me of the strong Muslim influence. In the bedside-drawer where in the US you would find a Gideon Bible, there is a prayer rug:



And in every hotel room we entered, there's a sign pointing to Mecca on the ceiling:



We had dinner and a couple of drinks and then fell fast asleep at 6pm. This was a bad thing because we didn't wake up till 4am (10 hours of sleep) when the alarm went off. In a minute you'll understand why this was bad. The car came for us at 5:20, for an 8:20 flight. We didn't mind being early, that's for sure!

Abu Dhabi's Etihad terminal has something unique. You enter US customs right at the Abu Dhabi gate before you get on the plane! It was SO cool. We have a thing called Global Entry (requires you to give the TSA every bit of private information you can imagine in trade for not waiting in long customs lines) so we got through really fast. That's cool because it means when you get to LAX, you simply walk off the plane, collect your luggage and leave.

We got to the front of every line so we'd be SURE we got on the plane and it worked!

Here we are enjoying some orange juice on the plane:



Now why was sleeping 10 hours a bad thing? Well because our flight home was 16 hours (the third longest flight in the world) so we needed to sleep on the plane to try and get in sync with LA. This was not happening. We were both wide awake. They give you jammies in business class, here I am sporting them in hopes that will make me sleepy.



We even had 180° flat beds with a little mattress on it, the cabin temperature was perfect and we had fat full bellies, but we slept maybe an hour or two if I round up.

When we landed, Kyle picked us up at the airport, drove us home, we took showers and changed into clean clothes, packed NEW bags and ran to San Diego to collect Tesla from Lindsay and Nolan and see Steve's parents Merlee and Ken. The good news is that since it took us 70 hours to get home from when we got up in Nepal till we landed in LA, it only took FIVE DAYS for the jet lag to stop us feeling like we had the flu!

I'll leave you with one final photo - not of our Tesla reunion as you might imagine, but me hugging our 17 year old cat Buzzy who does not get enough attention on Facebook:



Hope you enjoyed the journey!

Allison and Steve

P.S. Our luggage made it too, which I think is the biggest miracle of the trip!



## **Addendum: Earthquake in Nepal**

On a very sad note, about a month after we returned from our trip, Nepal was struck by a devastating magnitude 7.8 earthquake.

Several thousand people across Nepal were killed in the quake. Kathmandu, one of the cities we visited on our trip, was among the hardest hit in Nepal. Several of the temples and monuments that we visited were destroyed by the quake.

Steve made a video slide show of our experiences in Kathmandu to capture what a beautiful city it was. You can find it on YouTube



here: