

# THE TATTOO

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## Discovering India, a different world

By WESLEY SAXENA  
The Tattoo

After a sleepless, 14-hour flight with crappy food, I found myself in a van in New Delhi, India with really high seats, no seatbelts, and a crazy driver.

He wasn't the only crazy driver, either. Lots of people were driving weird. Apparently in India, there are no seatbelt laws, no speed limits, no one-way streets and no little dotted white lines dividing the road, mostly because the streets are made of dirt.

I was a long way from Connecticut.

In the next three weeks, my family visited Lucknow, India, where my father grew up, along with some of the most famous places in the world, including the Taj Mahal.

### I'm a boy!

My shoulder-length hair got me into trouble in India. Every time I went to the bathroom, someone who noticed my longish hair would direct me to the women's room.

When we got in the cab to go to my grandparents' house, the driver said something I heard a lot: *ladki*, which means girl. So I learned the phrase, "Mein ladka hoon," which means, "I'm a boy." But I didn't have a chance to use it. By the time I remembered to say it, it was too late.

India looks a lot different now that I'm 12 and more observant, but I still can't believe that six years ago I didn't notice the hundreds of dogs, goats, cows and water buffaloes that roam the streets of Lucknow eating garbage. What really amazed me was that I tried to give a cow some leaves from a tree and it didn't want it – it just went back to licking a wrapper on the ground. Now that's what I call adaptation.

In Lucknow, there are also a lot of beggars, which was the hardest thing to get used to. The problem is that you don't know if they really need money or if they're using it on something useful. You could give a woman some money and she might go home to her gang boss, or you might let a guy with barely any clothes have money and he'll come out of the store with tobacco. Another thing is that if you give someone money, there is a chance that a whole mob will surround you within minutes. That happened to me when I was six, and it terrified me.

### Home in Lucknow

My grandparents' house has an open cement drainage ditch carrying sewage and storm water running right beside it, as most Indian homes do. Some people use the ditch as an outdoor toilet.

High red brick walls and an iron fence enclose the garden in front of my grandparents' house. The three-bedroom house looks tall, but most of the space is taken up by the high ceilings, which I think is a waste. But that's one way to keep the hot air near the ceilings in the summer. There is a marble entryway that leads to the living room, dining room and staircase. Everything is on the ground floor except a small apartment upstairs where my cousins live.

There are three bathrooms, all with doors leading outside. Two have holes in the floor instead of toilets, and the third has an American-style toilet, a bathtub with ice-cold water, and a washing machine for clothes.

One of our first trips took us to this awesome crocodile park that had eight to 12-foot-long mugger crocodiles and bizarre long-nosed ones called gharials.

Seeing the crocodiles was the most fun I'd had yet. Other than that, I amused myself by using a magnifying glass and the sun to burn paper. It doesn't work very well in Connecticut, but in India it smokes in seconds, even in winter.

### Fireball food

A restaurant called Gemini Continental is supposed to be the best restaurant in Lucknow, and it probably would be if everything didn't have tons of chili, masala and black pepper in it.

Everything was so spicy. We ordered tandoori chicken – my favorite – but this chicken was drenched in chili sauce. My hot and sour soup was not sour at all, just ridiculously spicy.

Eventually I just ate naan, which is like pita bread, only better. But even while I was safe with bread, I accidentally ate a piece of naan that was stuffed with a sort of cheese and lots of green chilies. That did it. I practically exploded. I was still shaking by the time we got to the car. I'm not used to my food being that spicy. At my grandparents' house, most of the meals are pretty mild. I practically lived on lentils, aloo (potatoes) and chapattis – a thin, tortilla-like bread – that Dadiji (my grandma) makes every day.

For a snack, I ate KrackJack, sweet and salty crackers that taste like Wheat Thins. The tap water isn't drinkable even for my grandparents, so we drank bottled water, seltzer and homemade lime soda. The milk was too creamy for me.

There's Coke, Sprite, Pepsi and other familiar soda, but India also has its own soft drink called Thums Up. It's made by Coca Cola and tastes a lot like Coke, but has its own appealing zest. I had lots of Thums Up. It's really addicting.

### A pricey haircut, a cheap market

It wasn't long after I arrived in India that I had to face the thing I had been dreading: a haircut. We went to an expensive barber shop called Habibs. What waste of money! It cost 20 times what Dadiji, my grandpa, pays for his haircuts.

Once the barber started, my dad left the room and I couldn't tell the barber to stop or what to do because he spoke Hindi and I don't. I ended up with hair not even half as long as before. It looked horrible! My social life is ruined.

One of the last places we went to that day was the Aminabad Market. I can't imagine a cheaper or more crowded place anywhere in the world. People were practically shoulder to shoulder and there were tons of beggars. I must've given away 50 rupees to them. Vendors were selling every-

thing from clothes to candy for next to nothing.

At the end of the day, we visited two tombs of an old leader of Lucknow, Nawab Asaf Ud-Daula, and his wife. Each vine-covered tomb looked like a small version of the Taj Mahal. A small, brown monkey sat on the wall surrounding the temple area. My two little brothers were thrilled by it, since there aren't any monkeys running free in Connecticut.

### An intruder!

We had some excitement at my grandparents' house that night. In the middle of dinner, my great aunt shouted down from upstairs and she and my grandparents kept shouting back and forth. Then my dad joined in.

I thought there might be a robber from the looks on my grandparents' faces, but I soon found out that it was a snake on the roof, not a burglar. That didn't make me feel a whole lot better, because in India most of the snakes are either poisonous or constrictors.

My cousin Robin came bounding down the back stairs and through the side door with a stick to try to kill it. Here's how the snake was disposed of as far as I know: first Robin tried to hit it with the stick, but it broke. Then my dad tried with a cricket bat, but it broke, too. Finally my great uncle lit a stick with a match and poured kerosene on the snake. It was sizzled. Superstition demanded that they burn it completely, put it in two bags and throw it far away from the house. We were worried about more snakes, but none came.

Next stop: the Taj Mahal.

### The train to Agra

When you hear the words "Taj Mahal," you imagine great beauty, but don't realize the effort you have to put in to get there.

A cab took us to the Lucknow train station for our trip to the Taj Mahal in Agra. The train station, which is a great work of architecture on the outside, is pretty sick on the inside. We arrived shortly before our late-night train so we could fall right back to sleep for the overnight ride.

When I had to use the toilet, I didn't go all the way into the bathroom because it was so revolting. If I had actually entered, I would have had urine dripping on my head. It was everywhere in the scum-covered bathroom except where it was supposed to go – into a drain along the wall.

Once on the train, we made our beds, which were folded out from the ceiling and the seats. After drawing a bit on the top bunk, I crashed. When we all woke up a few hours from Agra, everyone had to go to the bathroom. The bathroom on the train was not as disgusting as the one in the station.

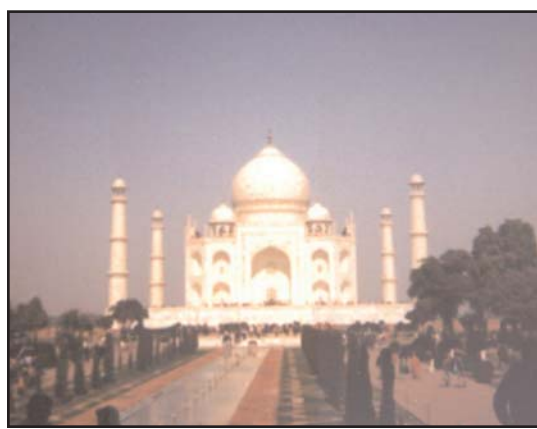
At the beginning of the trip it was fine, even if it was just a small hole in the floor of the train. But by the end of our journey, it smelled awful. I almost puked. I ran back to our compartment as soon as I could.

### Rickshaws, autos and cabs, oh my!

When we got to the Agra train station at 5 a.m., many people tried to get us to take their cabs. My dad finally found a guy with good rates who would drive us to our hotel. From there, we could walk to the Taj Mahal.

On our way, people in cars and rickshaws tried to get us to hire them to take us to the Taj Mahal, but we wanted to walk.

In India, there are many ways of getting around. Rickshaws are like large tricycles with two wheels in the back that support a small carriage to sit in while the driver pedals up front. Auto rickshaws, or just autos, are like tiny four-seater cars that have three wheels like a rickshaw. Drivers of both these vehicles, horse carriages and cabs bugged us about using them.



### The onslaught

When we walked through the gates of the road that led to the Taj Mahal, vendors pounced on us, trying to sell their little trinkets. They shoved stupid pens and little cheap plastic Taj Mahal snow globes into our faces.

Self-styled "tour guides" wanted to show us around and photographers with big bulky cameras wanted lots of money to snap our picture. Food sellers also tried to get us to buy drinks, peanuts and other snacks.

The one that bugged me the most was a boy, a little older than me, who was selling pens. He had a burned face and I think his lip was missing. He used that as a sort of weapon by shoving his face into our faces and telling us to buy his pens. He followed us almost all the way to the ticket booth.

### The Taj Mahal

I can barely describe the Taj Mahal with words. The incredible majesty of the Taj Mahal, though, wasn't as amazing as the feeling I got when I saw it. It's like, "Geez! I'm standing in front of the Taj Mahal!!!" I felt like leaping for joy.

A reflecting pool led from the entrance gates to the actual building. When we got close to the building, we had to take our shoes off or cover them to go inside. I went in my socks so I could slide on the marble.

Inside and out, the Taj Mahal was dazzling

white. I can't imagine how bright it was when it was finished in 1648. Except for some ugly wooden barricades to keep tourists away from certain areas, it's made entirely of stone. White marble makes up the bulk of it, but all the other colors on the lower part of the exterior and on the inside of the building are different gems.

These gems – carved centuries ago – had to be just the right shape, and the workers had to create perfectly-sized holes in the marble to fit them into. All of the outlines of the gemstone shapes and the Persian script that framed the entrances were a solid piece of a black gem. I couldn't imagine having to carve out a pure gem outline and make it fit perfectly, but they did it.

Besides the marble brought from Persia, or Iran, 16 other stones were carried from across Asia and Europe for use in the Taj Mahal. They included turquoise, tiger's eye and a bright blue stone called lapis lazuli. All this carving took 20,000 artisans and laborers 17 years, from 1631 to 1648, to complete.

I thought the Taj Mahal was a palace, but it turned out it's a building with the tomb of Emperor Shah Jahan's wife in it.

When we left the Taj Mahal riding in a camel cart, guess who was following us on his bike? The boy who sold pens. When my dad finally bought a pen, he raced ahead of us to the next group of people. We soon found out that the pen had no ink in it.

### Parakeets and monkey business

The next day, we set off for Sikandra, a monument to Akbar that includes his tomb. It's 123 acres of land, 100 of which is a garden and grounds where animals roam. The remaining land is taken up by an elevated stone walkway with a big, five-story building in the center.

In the middle of the building is Akbar's burial chamber. The room enclosing the chamber had high ceilings, which supported echoes of sounds as soft as a whisper.

Outside were many archways with dome ceilings. A guide told us about a cool way to communicate with each other using these domes. It works like this: one person stands with his face pressed into the corner of an open room. The other person stands facing a diagonal corner. Somehow the sound – even a whisper – travels up the wall, across the dome ceiling and to the other person's ear. Also, if you stand on the center tile in one of these domed rooms and slap your hands together, it's transformed into a booming thunder clap.

But even these cool activities could not top all the animals we saw. Green and blue parakeets darted in and out of the large cracks in the building. Peacocks and peahens strutted around the grounds with the elegant racing deer, each with two long spiral horns. Aggressive red-faced monkeys lined the stone walkways, but there were other monkeys – gray, white and black langurs – that are a lot tamer, though we did see one try to steal a man's camera. My little brother fed one langur and we watched another one, a showoff, in a game of Follow the Leader.

Leading a bunch of monkey babies, it walked along a wall and jumped up and ricocheted off a lamppost. The best part was when a boy rolled his ball to one of the baby langurs and then they all started to play with it, jumping around, fighting for it and tossing it to each other. But then a man took it away from them and they all huddled with their moms.

### The maze of Bara Imambara

A few days after we saw the monkeys, we headed off to Bara Imambara, a Muslim holy place. I was there when I was six but couldn't remember it because I was scared and closed my eyes for most of the time.

It's a big, tall building with a lot of holes, tunnels and stairs. I'm not kidding about the holes – if it wasn't for our guide, we could've died. If you don't edge along the side of a wall carefully in Bara Imambara, you could fall through a small opening and tumble far down onto the stone floor. After our guide led us around and showed us that anything you say can be heard because the walls are hollow, he told us to see if we could get out by ourselves and try to make the right choices. Since none of us could, he led us out.

### A bad day for goats

The next day was a Muslim holiday called Bakrid, which to me basically means 'goat killing day.' Our neighbors in Lucknow were celebrating it and we could hear the cries of the goat as it bled to death. Yuck! What I don't understand is how it's a sacrifice if you're the one that eats the goat after you kill it. Shouldn't God get it?

Anyway, we were invited to our neighbor's house for Bakrid. My mom doesn't eat goat, so they made fish and even eggs for her. I thought I was going to have a hard time because I didn't think the kids spoke English. But it turned out their 10-year-old daughter spoke very good English ... too good. She sounded like a professor when she spoke to me in English, but when she spoke to her parents in Hindi, she sounded like a kid. Foreign language teachers in India must be from England.

I played chess with an older boy whose English wasn't very good. He said it was his favorite game, but he had trouble remembering which way the pieces were supposed to move. On top of that, I killed his queen in five moves.

Our neighbors actually ate before we arrived, which I found weird, but I guess that's good because the table was tiny. There was goat curry, which I ate a lot of, goat kabob which was deadly spicy, fish curry and fried fish which were stuffed with bones, boiled eggs for my picky brothers and lots of different types of bread.

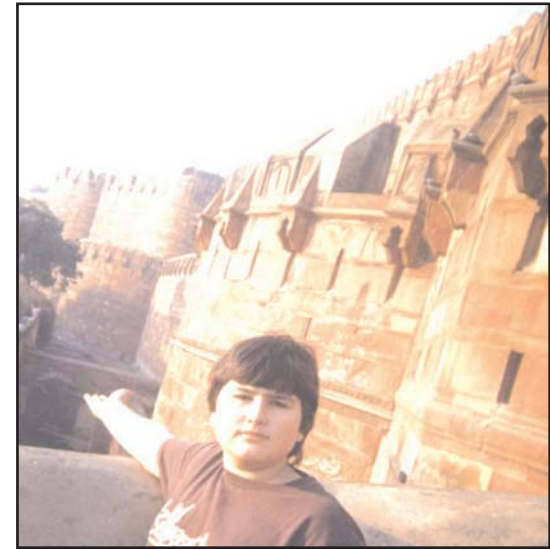
For dessert, there was a small, store-bought cake. It was awful! They might as well have given us gravel mixed with water and topped with shaving cream and slices of sponge. (Note to self: do not eat American-originated food in India. The pizza's too spicy, the milk's too creamy and

the cake tastes horrible.)

I didn't want to be impolite, so I ate one slice as quickly as possible to get it over with. But then they thought I liked it so much that they asked if I wanted more. I said I'd take a sliver, but they gave me half a piece – oh, puke!

Later that night when we went back to my grandparents' house, I found out the boy that I played chess with was actually our neighbors' servant. His English was poor because he didn't go to school.

When I went to get some chicken with my dadaji the next day, I noticed a goat wearing the same headdress and fancy collar as the goats that were supposed to be sacrificed wore. I wondered why, because Bakrid was over. The goat strutted in front of a dog as if to say, "Ha! I escaped the sacrifice! I knocked over the table and ran like crazy! Go me!"



Tattoo photo

Wesley Saxena at the Red Fort. Read more about his visits to India's tourist spots at [www.ReadTheTattoo.com](http://www.ReadTheTattoo.com).

### Dispatch from Delhi

A couple of nights before we left India, the country was observing Lohri, the traditional Indian festival celebrating the full moon and the beginning of spring.

At our hotel, a huge bonfire blazed right in the middle of about 200 tables set up in the hotel yard. The fire billowed smoke and ashes over people stupid enough to sit in front of it. We sampled a lot of the foods and drinks, including peanuts with different spices on them. Kids played on a big inflatable slide and an airplane ride. In front, men with machine guns danced to songs sung by a guy wearing fancy robes.

The next day we went to one of the oldest, biggest markets in New Delhi. The coolest thing about it was that it was at least 12 feet underground. Damp and filled with incense fumes that burned the eyes, the market had shops selling everything from clothes to video games to antiques. Shopkeepers harassed us to buy their products. If we even just glanced at vendors, they'd pounce, speaking fast in Hindi about why we needed what they were selling.

I noticed that people in New Delhi generally didn't cross the streets. Instead, they went down some steps, and walked under the streets, like a subway for walkers. We went across underground only once. My brothers were thrilled. Whether we were above or below ground, we were clearly tourists and people continued to harass us to buy things. They bombarded us most with little portable chess sets made of corkboard that probably wouldn't last more than a couple days.

### Time to say goodbye

As I got on the plane for home the next day, I was filled with emotion. I wanted to stay in India and continue being crazy on the roof and waking up to a beautiful sunny morning every day, and, of course, being with all my relatives. But I was missing my puppy, my friends, hot showers and my bed.

There are just so many things Connecticut has that India doesn't. Then again, India has so many things Connecticut doesn't. I decided that I wouldn't enjoy India as much if I actually lived there. It felt like going back home was probably the right choice, yet as I stepped out of the airport into the freezing New England air, I couldn't help but wonder, "Where are all the cows?"

## The story continues

Wesley Saxena made the most of his trip to India, but we couldn't fit all he had to say on this page, our 150th printed edition of *The Tattoo*.

We hope you'll read his whole story at [www.ReadTheTattoo.com](http://www.ReadTheTattoo.com) and find out what he thought of the Indira Gandhi Dam, highly polished Lohiya Park and trashy La Martiniere College in Lucknow. He also wrote of searching for British bullets at the Residency in Lucknow.

He checked out the Red Fort or the mysterious Agra Fort, Akbar's massive and amazing summer palace, the hornet-infested Bulund Dar-waza gate and learned about the thread legend of the tomb of the Suffi Saint, all near Agra, home of the Taj Mahal.

In New Delhi, he saw the tower of Qut'b Minar and climbed around Jantar Mantar, an astronomical observatory.

The online piece offers other details as well, including why kite fighting in India is not for the faint of heart.

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