



# JOURNEY TO INDIA

Chapter three: Rishikesh,  
Pushkar and Beyond

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Before I left Dharamsala, I bid farewell to Peter. He had no money and was skipping out on his 25-cent-a-night rent at the Tibetan Association Hotel to travel as a Saddhu. He needed some cash, and wasn't going to take any belongings with him, so to help him out I bought a blanket he had for 30 rupees, then about three dollars. It was a handmade wool blanket he'd bought off the shoulders of the Tibetan woman who had

made it. It's beautiful, and I still have it more than 30 years later.

My next stop was Rishikesh, which happened to be the village where the Beatles stayed with the Maharishi. That had nothing to do with why I went to Rishikesh. I was at the station intending to go to Varanasi, when I met Robert. He wasn't that friendly. He was very independent and somewhat standoffish. I think because he considered himself such an old Asia hand, having been on the road for about eight or nine years. He'd played some bit roles in Bollywood movies and also spent a lot of time in Thailand, where he had a girlfriend he was crazy about but he had to leave because of visa problems.

Robert was heading to Haridwar and Rishikesh. It turned out to be much easier to get to Rishikesh than Varanasi, and I decided to go there first.

I don't remember how we ended up at Swami Prakesh Bharti's ashram. Maybe there weren't any hotels available, or they were too expensive, or maybe Robert knew about the place. There weren't any available rooms at Swami Prakesh Bharti's, but he said we could sleep on the roof for two rupees, about twenty-five cents, and that's what we did.

After about a week I did get a room, and I think that was four rupees. I guess it was an ashram, but there wasn't any kind of organized spirituality. There was a large walled-in area, full of trees and grass. The small rooms were along one side and there was a patio area, with a place for a fire, where everyone would smoke chillums and drink tea. There were no meals. The bathroom was not much more than a hut in the middle of the forested area, and there was a sign saying "no toilet paper," which was necessary since it was really nothing more than a hole in the ground.

It was Robert who told me how to use the lota and my left hand to clean my bottom. Quite to my surprise it wasn't disgusting at all. It was a great pleasure, much more comfortable than toilet paper, and much more effective, too. If you think about it toilet paper only provides the thinnest layer of porous paper, and although the paper is somewhat absorbent, what you are mostly doing is wiping or smearing the shit away, which has to leave residue. Using the lota with water you really clean your bottom. It's great, and I still use a lota today.

It was from Robert I also learned about Channa Bhatura, a chickpea curry poured over puffy fried bread. Channa Bhatura cost about five cents, and it was a meal. He also told me about sulfur powder.

In Rishikesh I was getting little sores, mostly on my legs, that wouldn't heal because the flies kept eating at the scabs. I'd put sulfur powder on the sores, which would keep the flies at bay and help the sores heal. Rishikesh was the only place I got those sores or had that problem with the flies all the time I was in India.

Robert and I left Rishikesh together, heading for Delhi. I remember the 22-hour bus ride. The bus was an old school bus, and three of us were crammed into the seat. The only way to sleep was to take my shoulder rag, wad it up, and place it between my forehead and the bar on the back of the seat in front of me. I'd bounce and rock and somehow get some sleep. When we stopped to get something to eat at some weird country bus stop restaurant, which was a large covered area, the toilets were simply slabs of concrete, enclosed by a curtain. You could shit on the concrete, clean your ass with a lota you had filled at a tap outside, and then leave. An Untouchable would come and clean the slab for the next customer.

When we arrived in Delhi Robert led me to Pahar Ganj in Old Delhi and the Venus hotel. I got a small room on the roof for about one dollar. And it actually had a bathroom, without hot water, of course. It was from fellow travelers, like Robert, that I continued to learn how to travel and live in India.

Robert and I parted ways in Delhi. I don't remember too much about that time in Delhi, except getting some great Bhang and going to the Tourist Camp to look for Lorna, at least that's what I think her name was. I had met Lorna in Dharamsala. I forget what country she came from. She was with another guy at the time, and we didn't have much time together, but she had told me she was going to Delhi and would be in the tourist camp. So, when I was in Delhi I went looking for her. I took a rickshaw to the camp and walked through the grounds but couldn't find her. Maybe I was too stoned.

Bhang is marijuana processed in a way that it can be eaten, without having to cook it, and it's most commonly taken in a lassi, which is a sort of yogurt milkshake. I drank many non-intoxicating lassis in India, some just yogurt flavor, some with mango or banana.

I remember getting in a rickshaw and telling the driver I wanted Bhang. He took me somewhere in the depths of Old Delhi, where a thick green ooze of Bhang Banana Lassi was squeezed through a cloth and into a glass. I drank it down and got back in the rickshaw. The trip back to the hotel was an amazing hallucinatory experience. The people and shapes of India passed before my eyes as if in a slow motion movie, with edges softened into what could be described as a romantic tableau, especially for someone whose head had been battered and conditioned by the turbulent values of the 1960s, when rebellion against the establishment and the norm seemed such an essential part of an authentic life.

I sold my boots in Delhi, which just left me with my Birkenstock sandals, and bought a ticket to Pushkar in Rajasthan via Jaipur and Ajmer.



Rajasthan is the source of many images of India familiar to Westerners, including men in turbans riding on elephants and those trippy, mirrored fabrics so popular in the 1960s. There are also shoes curling up at the toes that look like something from a fairy tale, and the women wear tops that just come down to their nipples, leaving the bottom half of their breasts exposed.

Pushkar is one of India's sacred cities, and the location of one of the country's holiest lakes. The Pushkar fair, or Mela, is one of the most popular and colorful of the Thar Desert. It is a religious celebration lasting five days combined with a market where camels are bought and sold, and camels, horses and cows are shown and raced. The festive marketplace atmosphere is laden with spiritual fervor, as thousands of devotees descend upon the city to bathe in the sacred lake, as Sadhus, who have come down from the Himalayas, chant and sing holy verses.

I happened to meet Gaeton at the station. I'd known Gaeton, a French Canadian, in Rishikesh, where I'd given him a haircut before he had to go to the embassy to see about a visa problem. He and I decided to share a room in a house. I think the room was about a dollar and the woman would cook for us for about fifty cents. There wasn't any running water, and baths meant going down to the bathroom, a shed in the courtyard, filling a lota from some large drums of water, soaping up and pouring water over oneself to rinse off.

There was a terrace outside our room, and when I would sit and play my Moroccan drums peacocks and monkeys would surround me. Although there was grillwork over the windows, we had to be careful not to leave anything too close to them or the monkeys would reach in and steal things.

I had no set schedule throughout my years in India. I might hear an intriguing tale about a place, or meet someone, or just wake up one morning and it would just seem right to leave for the next leg of this adventure.

So one day I was bouncing in the bed of a little truck/taxi, on my way out of Pushkar. Wearing kurta Pyjama, a long, thin, loose cotton shirt over simple pants of plain cotton, with all my belongings in my Tibetan backpack made of canvas, I was looking out at the vast sky filled with a moment of disbelief, that I was really here, in India. I was filled with a happy sense of wonder as I headed to Jaipur to catch a train for Agra, home of the Taj Mahal.

