Team Phun! Rules Rajasthan — A Boy’s Trip through India

by Bob Bestor

India is relentless. It is a non-stop, chaotic mix of crowds, cows, motorbikes, trash, tuk-tuks and trucks.

I went there with three high school buddies (hereafter known as Team Phun!) as my lovely wife and most trusted travel companion Nancy agreed that an opportunity to take a big trip with the fellas shouldn’t be missed. So four middle-aged American males were off to India. You’ve seen the “The Hangover?” Well, we even had a Doug along with us. I had to promise my daughter Sarah that we wouldn’t lose him.

Who are these guys? Well Dave is the kind of guy who brings an old wallet, for fun fills it with Thai currency, and walks around with it hanging out of his back pocket, hoping to get pickpocketed. He also comes up with Obamistan as the answer to the question, “Where you from?” which we get asked about two dozen times a day. Erik comes totally prepared with coffee, filters, a filter cone and an extension cord to boot. Doug gave me several guitar lessons and tips over the course of the trip. So, ideal travel companions—thus Team Phun! was born.

Now I’d seen the India of the movies and media, I’d heard the tales of aggressive touts and unscrupulous taxi drivers, and I’d listened to every traveler’s tale of general discomfort and acute illness. So I was steeled for this trip. India’s reputation had me sweating the details in preparation. I consulted doctors and loaded up on antibiotics and other “just in case” meds. I confirmed my vaccination history, got a Hepatitis A shot, and then stuffed about a

Breezing Through TSA Security

Why I Signed up for Pre-Check

by Nancy Bestor

I think we can all agree that the TSA security screening process, with its slow moving lines and all the frustrating fumbling and juggling, undressing and re-dressing, and unpacking and re-packing of 3-1-1 bags, belts, shoes, laptops and more, is quite annoying. And at the end of a long, uncomfortable international flight, it’s never fun to stand in yet another slow-moving customs line, observing the entire time that far too many of the counters are unstaffed.

I’m not entirely opposed to lines. I once waited six hours outside a movie theater on cold, hard cement to see Star Wars (although admittedly I was 11 years old). I’m always willing to wait in line to ride continued on page 3

New Travel Products to Make Any Traveler’s Life Easier

by Ember Hood

Bob and Nancy recently returned from the annual Travel Goods Association Travel Show, where they found some great new products to make your next trip easier and more secure. Read on to learn about these excellent new travel items!

Eagle Creek Flatbed Duffels

If you’re looking for a lightweight wheeled bag with lots of roomy and simple packing space, then Eagle Creek’s No Matter What Rolling Flatbed Duffels ($175 - $220) fit the bill. Made with Bi-Tech, Eagle Creek’s most durable fabric ever, they are straightforward, easy to pack, and lightweight with a rugged, water-resistant exterior that is sure to protect your gear against baggage handlers and the elements. While designed primarily with simplicity in mind, Flatbed Duffels feature a mesh interior pocket and a quick-stash exterior pocket for just the right amount of organization. Big and tough oversized wheels make rolling

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dozen mini bottles of hand sanitizer into my toiletry kit.

Before leaving the United States, we booked Ashok’s Taxi Service for $850, which included 16 days of travel from airport pick up to drop off and about 1,400 miles of driving and basic travel services in between. We chose Mr. Ashok based on his stellar reviews on Tripadvisor. His service—and his driver Pramod’s—definitely lived up to expectations. Split among the four us it was not only an excellent choice, it was a bargain.

Other than a few days in Delhi and Agra, the majority of our time was spent in the northeastern state of Rajasthan. Bordering Pakistan and the Thar Desert to its west, Rajasthan’s 130,000 square miles are dotted with rugged forts, opulent palaces, ancient temples, mysterious tombs, and teeming cities, towns and villages.

We started in Delhi. Included in our deal with Ashok’s Taxi Service was a private tour led by Mr. Ashok himself of his childhood stomping grounds, Old Delhi. Ashok greeted us enthusiastically, and instructed us to wear our backpacks on our chests as we dove into this relatively small and ancient heart of what has become a modern, third-world megacity. And as you might expect, Old Delhi absolutely swarms with activity. Its arcaded sidewalks are jammed with shoppers, vendors, deliverymen and much, much more. Businesses and dwellings are crammed into its low-slung, crumbling buildings that are all connected by a ramshackle, spider-web network of electrical lines, cables and boxes that hang precariously overhead.

There are spice shops that are no more than four feet across—just wide enough to display their offerings down one wall and for customers to squeeze along the other for close inspection. And in the middle of this avalanche of activity, laborers nap on their carts in the sunshine. When it comes to Old Delhi, just about everything you’ve ever imagined about India is true.

Next it was on to Agra and the Taj Mahal. The Taj is remarkable and lives up to its reputation. Our only complaint was that its touts did not. We were actually excited to run the legendary gauntlet to its entrance. We were ready to plow through the hordes, fending off offers of trinkets, guide services, camel rides, religious relics and more. Dave had his dummy wallet ready and I vowed to capture the whole thing on camera. Perhaps it was too early, too foggy, or too cold, but we walked straight to the ticket booth without interruption. It was the sole disappointment of the trip.

What followed was a couple of weeks of longish drives as we headed west towards the Thar Desert. Rolling past fields of wheat, barley and mustard, with the unflappable Pramod at the wheel, was broken up by daily stops at temples, forts and fabulous, inexpensive roadside eateries.

And no Travel Essentials travel story would be complete without a full account of the food. And this is where I was most sorry not to have Nancy along, as this was easily one of the very best food trips ever.

From day one to day 16, whether it was white tablecloth dining, an Indian chain restaurant, a truck stop or a street cart, just about every morsel of food I put in my mouth rated from very good to dynamite. And best of all, almost always, the less we spent, the better it was. At truck stops for lunch, we would regularly dig into fresh, delectable dishes, accompanied by a continuous stream of piping hot chapatis, as we worked through our meal. A small feast for the five of us, with drinks and a round of chai to finish, was always in the $8-12 neighborhood—another wonderful bargain.

While all the stops on our itinerary—Jaipur, Pushkar, Udaipur and Bikaner—have much to recommend, I enjoyed the legendary Blue City of Jodhpur most. We stayed right in the middle of its tangle of streets and alleyways, with its massive and imposing 500-year-old Mehrangarh Fort towering above and its stately Ghanta Ghar Clock Tower and Sardar Market a short walk away.

Pramod threaded our van through thick crowds, down the narrowest of alleys, and around the tightest of corners to deliver us to Krishna Prakash Heritage Hotel where, after some friendly negotiations, we booked one of the best rooms of the trip. We got four beds in two bedrooms, a large, fully furnished living room with floor to ceiling windows, and a huge bathroom.

"Don’t worry about the world ending today. It’s already tomorrow in Australia."
—Charles M. Schulz
Breezing Through TSA Security...

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Indiana Jones at Disneyland. And I’m the first one in my family to suggest we wait in line for a scoop of gourmet ice cream at Portland’s Salt and Straw. But lines at the airport? Well, they drive me just a little bit crazy. I get in those slow moving, cattle-chute lines and can’t help but focus on how many stations are not open, how many TSA officers appear to be “on break,” and how slowly those in front of me take off their shoes and take their liquids out of their suitcase, and how many of them still don’t understand that filled water bottles cannot be taken through TSA security checkpoints.

Thus I was delighted when Bob and I were approved for the US Global Entry Program. Global Entry provides expedited customs clearance for pre-approved, low-risk travelers arriving into the United States. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the Global Entry Program offers automatic entry into the Transportation Security Administration’s Pre-Check Program.

Travelers can opt to apply for the Pre-Check program only, at a cost of $85 and good for five years. But if you travel internationally, it seems to us that the better deal is to apply for the Global Entry Program for $100, (also good for five years), which provides both expedited customs clearance and TSA Security Pre-Check. Both programs can be applied for online. The tricky part, however, is that you must visit a TSA Enrollment Center (for TSA Pre-Check) or a Global Entry Enrollment Center (for Global Entry) for a face-to-face interview. In the case of TSA Pre-Check, this appointment includes bringing valid identification, as well as citizenship documentation. The Global Entry program requires an interview as well. When we applied for Global Entry, interview appointments were being booked six months out, and the closest Enrollment Center was 350 miles away at the San Francisco Airport. While waiting for our appointment at SFO, we talked to another applicant from Los Angeles, where interviews at LAX were being booked 18 months out. She opted to make an appointment in San Francisco, and flew up specifically for it.

In our case, the rigmarole has been worth it. As advertised, since obtaining our Global Entry status, we have skipped customs lines every time upon re-entering the US. Instead we breeze directly to a Global Entry kiosk, where we scan our passport, answer a couple of questions on the screen, grab the receipt that the machine spits out, and we’re done. Yay!

Additionally, getting TSA Pre-Check status with the Global Entry pass has been a time and hassle saver as well. Most airports have specific TSA Pre-Check lines that are much shorter than the regular security checkpoint lines. As an added bonus, which is as good as bypassing lines, TSA Pre-Check travelers do not need to take off their shoes, belts and coats, nor do they need to remove their liquids from suitcases. I didn’t realize how much of a hassle these things were until I was no longer required to do them. I am delighted when I don’t have to take off my shoes, and walk (in my stocking feet) over an old and heavily trafficked airport carpet that surely has not been cleaned anytime recently.

Is the TSA Pre-Check or Global Entry program worth it for every traveler? Maybe not. You must measure how many times a year you fly against the cost and hassle of applying for the program. Additionally, travelers 75 years and older are not subject to the same security screening measures as younger travelers, so it might not be worth it if you are over 75. Eligible members of the armed forces also do not need to apply for either program, as their Department of Defense identification number already clears them for TSA Pre-Check. We fly often enough, are not over 75, and are not members of the armed forces. Additionally, we fly internationally at least once a year. Thus we decided that the Global Entry Program is well worth it for us.

Although it was a good decision at the time, especially since I had a crush on Luke Skywalker, I don’t see myself waiting outside a movie theater for six hours any time soon. Those days are over. And with the Global Entry Pass, my days of waiting in long airport security lines are hopefully over as well. Good riddance.

The US Department of Homeland Security compares the TSA Pre-Check Program and the Global Entry Program at this web address: www.dhs.gov/comparison-chart. The site also provides information on how to apply to each program.

—Nancy Bestor is the co-owner of Travel Essentials. She’s currently growing her hair out for Princess Leia hair buns.
New Travel Products to Make Travel Easier...

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easy, no matter how rough the road or
how heavy the load. And of course, Eagle
Creek’s legendary “No Matter What”
Lifetime Warranty means you’ll never
have to worry about your bag being
damaged! Guaranteed.

ExOfficio SportMesh Underwear
For years ExOfficio has made our very
favorite travel underwear. And with the
recent launch of their fabulous new Sport
Mesh fabric, they have made
a great product
even better. It’s
smoother,
silkier,
and more
breathable
than the
original. It
even dries
faster, too.

Sport Mesh
boasts maximum stretch for maximum
comfort and they’re anti-microbial and
moisture-wicking, so you stay cool, dry,
and best of all, fresh, as you roam the
globe. In fact, they dry so quickly, you
can easily wash them in your hotel sink at
night and they’ll be ready to wear the next
morning. Available for women in hipkini
and bikini styles, ($22) and for men in a
3” boxer brief ($26) style. Two pair is all
you need to take on the world!

FeatherLight RFID-Blocking Wallet
Weighing in at a mere two ounces, the
FeatherLight RFID Blocking Wallet
($13.95) is easily the lightest billfold
we’ve ever carried! Its thin-yet-durable
rip-stop nylon adds very little bulk to your
pocket, while keeping you organized with
three card slots and a bill compartment.
To top it off, the FeatherLight Wallet
also blocks RFID (radio frequency
identification) signals, protecting your
personal and credit card information from
digital thieves, and offering peace of mind.

Door Jammer
The Door Jammer ($29.95) is a simple
yet strong personal security device that
protects you from intruders, wherever
you stay. It installs easily at the base of
any door and with a simple twist of its
bolt, converts pressure on the door into
downward force, ensuring that the unit
stays locked in place. But, in case of
emergency, it’s easy to remove from the
inside. You’ll slumber peacefully on your
next trip, knowing that your door will stay
secure all night.

Lync System EC Luggage
Eagle Creek’s new Lync System Luggage
is an ultra-light and extremely versatile
line of collapsible rolling bags that
cleverly convert into backpacks. This
amazingly functional line is available in
four sizes ranging from an international
carry-on friendly 20” ($254.95) to a
spacious 29” ($299.95) with room for all
your gear! We know weight matters and
the Lync System Rolling Duffels deliver
with the lightest rolling bags we’ve ever
carried. The Lync 22” Rolling Carry-On
weighs in at just 4 pounds and 9 ounces!
And if closet space is tight, every Lync
System bag quickly breaks down for
easy and compact storage in its included
stuff sack. As an added bonus, all Lync
System bags are covered by Eagle Creek’s
legendary “No Matter What” Lifetime
Warranty.

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“The great difference between voyages rests not with the ships, but with the people you meet on them.” — AMELIA E. BARR
New Travel Products to Make Travel Easier...

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**Goodwipes**
Sometimes you just can’t get cleaned up. Perhaps there’s no time, or maybe there’s no shower available. No matter the reason, Goodwipes ($7.99) are ready to come to the rescue. Basically a shower in a super-sized and durable wet wipe, Goodwipes Body Wipes are alcohol-free, hypoallergenic and pH balanced. They revitalize and cleanse with tea tree oil, peppermint, and ginseng. And, Goodwipes also offer a “Below the Belt” wipe ($5.99) for more intimate cleansing. The Below the Belt Goodwipes are flushable, and infused with gentle ingredients like aloe, vitamin E, and chamomile that your skin will love. Whatever your bathing needs, Goodwipes will keep you fresh and clean, even when you can’t get to a shower.

**Security Socks**
Need an extra-secret, extra-hidden pocket? We’ve got it for you! Security Socks ($14.95) give you the perfect spot to stash emergency cash, credit cards, and anything else that may need additional protection. Each sock offers a credit card sized pocket near the top of the calf that securely zips closed. They’ll also hold room keys, car keys, a driver’s license, and emergency contact information. In fact, you could store almost all of these items in a pair of Security Socks and be wallet free, secure, and ready for any adventure!

**Microfiber Robe Towel**
The new RobeTowl ($79.95) is a luxurious, full-sized microfiber bathrobe that doubles as a super-absorbent towel. Great for drying off after a shower or lounging by the pool, the RobeTowl also has full-sized pockets for your room key, toiletries, phone, trashy novel, water bottle, etc. The super soft and comfortable microfiber can absorb four times its weight in water and wring out almost instantly to near dry-ness. And with an anti-microbial treatment, your RobeTowl will stay fresh for your whole trip. Don’t take a robe AND a towel on your next trip, keep it simple and pack a RobeTowl instead!

**CitySafe Travel Handbag**
Security meets organization in the new CitySafe 200 Travel Handbag ($110) and the slightly smaller CitySafe 100 Travel Handbag ($89.95) from PacSafe. These purses both have all the amazing theft deterring features you need—slash-proof straps and side panels, pickpocket-proof zippers, and a shoulder strap that can also be used to anchor your bag to a chair or table. Plus, you’ll find an interior RFID-Blocking pocket that will stop digital thieves from scanning your personal information. Both sizes of the CitySafe Travel Handbag offer a padded tablet compartment that is perfect for your iPad or Kindle. An organizational panel for smaller items stores keys, phones, pens, etc., with a wallet ring and key clip to keep your goodies both secure and easy-to-find. Travel is a lot more fun when you know your gear is secure, so travel confidently with a CitySafe Travel Handbag.

**Loksak Waterproof Pouches**
Loksak waterproof pouches ($7.95 - $22.95) are great for cruises, beach & river trips, and humid, rainy locales. Loksak’s unique double-sealed pouches protect expensive electronics and other precious items against damage from water, dust and humidity. And since they’re clear, you can still see and use your phone while it’s being protected. Loksaks are 100% water and air tight, and come in a variety of sizes perfect for smart phones, tablets, passports, and more. So whatever you may need to protect from the elements, Loksak will get the job done.

“Venice is like eating an entire box of chocolate liqueurs in one go.” — TRUMAN CAPOTE
India’s highways, backroads and gravel tracks are a wonderland of inventive driving. Even on the smoothest and most modern, well marked, multi-lane, high-speed roads anything can happen at any time—like a herd of goats filling the slow lane, a car coming in the opposite direction on the shoulder, maybe a huge tractor bouncing along in the dark and taking up two lanes at about 12 miles an hour (at least he’s going in the right direction), or perhaps a camel-drawn cart heading in the opposite direction in the fast lane. We saw all these things and much more during our 16-day, 1,400-mile adventure on the roads of Rajasthan.

The man to guide us through this real life Mario Kart experience: Pramod. We never got his last name. Heck Pramod could be his last name. Like other famous one-named celebrities and heroes—Prince, Thor and Pelé come to mind—Pramod’s performance is unparalleled. He is one of the staff of drivers for Ashok’s Taxi Tours out of Delhi, and luckily when we booked our tour of Rajasthan, Pramod got the assignment. From the moment he picked us up at the airport in New Delhi, to the moment he dropped us off in the same spot 16 days later, we were in his capable hands.

Behind the wheel, Pramod is a combination Jedi Pilot and NASCAR driver, with the icy cool demeanor of Steve McQueen (the original) thrown in for good measure. He sees everything before it happens and, whether it’s a car or motorbike, livestock, or any combination, he accurately anticipates what they will do next, and deftly adjusts his path and rate of speed just enough to avoid the danger by inches. Never more, never less.

And believe me, there is danger in abundance on the roads of India. As a passenger, you must get used to your driver, when he wants to overtake another vehicle, honking his horn, flashing his lights and creeping (at high speeds of course) to within a few inches of the rear bumper of the vehicle to be overtaken. You must get used to your driver not only moving into the oncoming lane to pass a slower vehicle, but perhaps even moving all the way over to the oncoming shoulder to pass a vehicle who is himself passing a vehicle. You must get used to your driver, during such passes, trusting that the driver in the oncoming lane sees him and slows down enough for him to complete his pass. And finally you must get used to buses and other large vehicles claiming your lane from the opposite direction and not giving a thought to pulling over, and thus forcing your car all the way onto your own shoulder while two behemoths thunder down the road, side by side, taking up both lanes. And these are in no way extreme or isolated examples of things we saw only once or twice. This was all day, every day, and every time we were in the car.

But Pramod is more than up to the task of both driving and looking out for his guests. Every morning he wipes down the van’s exterior and sweeps the interior so even though it is slightly beat up, it still looks tidy. He is always ready and always accommodating. We want to leave at 10am, “No problem.” We want to stay an extra night, “No problem.” We need to find an English Beer & Wine Shop, “No problem.” We need some lunch, “No problem,” and he finds us a great spot in the middle of nowhere.

While he is certainly an attentive and resourceful host, it is his work on the roads that sets him apart. Despite the bedlam of Rajasthan’s roadways, the brakes are never slammed and the steering wheel never jerked. He is an uncanny judge of the speed of oncoming traffic. Whether gracefully swooping all the way onto the oncoming shoulder for a three-wide pass on a two-lane road, or slaloming his Toyota Innova Mini Van around, between, and through slow moving trucks on the highway while his brights and his horn run interference, Pramod is always calm, cool, and collected.

When faced with anything that might impede our progress (livestock in the road, a fellow driver drifting into his lane) Pramod imparts a series of steps to mitigate any danger. These steps are performed in pretty much the opposite order of a typical western driver. From the moment trouble arises he works his way through these steps, until the trouble is alleviated. (Keep in mind that all of these steps occur over the course of about 1.5 seconds all the way up to 10 seconds.)

1 – He beeps his horn.
2 – He honks his horn.
3 – He flashes his brights.
4 – He veers slightly.
5 – He veers more.
6 – He removes his foot from the gas.
7 – He moves his foot to the brake but does not brake.
8 – Finally, when all the above fails, he brakes, but only just enough so that he usually comes within just a few inches of the forward car’s rear bumper.

The result is always the same—danger narrowly averted.

I have no idea how much Pramod makes but in looking at gas prices and figuring the miles we covered and the number of days it took, it appears that Mr. Ashok and his staff are working on tight margins. And in looking at gas prices and figuring the miles we covered and the number of days it took, it appears that Mr. Ashok and his staff are working on tight margins. And after driving a tough 10 hours on pot-holed roads, through umpteen crowded small town markets, and around and through all the other hazards India’s roads have to offer, to deliver us to the airport by 8pm, he had to be in Jaipur, 5 to 6 hours away, by 8am the next morning for the start of yet another tour. “No problem,” said Pramod.

“A good holiday is one that is spent among people whose notions of time are vaguer than yours.” —J.B. Priestley
I love wandering around in big cities. There’s something quite fascinating to me about seeing a city from the sidewalk, rather than from a car or bus or train. Intriguing people-watching abounds as do architecturally engaging buildings and public spaces, unconventional graffiti art, and excellent window-shopping. My two gal pals and I were recently in New York City for four days and nights, and my plan was to explore as many neighborhood streets as our feet would allow. If we could combine that with good cheap ethnic eats and fun, low-cost entertainment, I knew I would be even happier.

We booked a two-bedroom apartment on www.airbnb.com for $240 per night. We all agreed that it was important to have a bed for each of the three of us—something that a single hotel room couldn’t comfortably provide—and to also have a kitchen for morning coffee and breakfast.

Our fifth floor walk-up was in the heart of Chinatown, and while the building wasn’t fancy (particularly in the hallways and staircase), the apartment itself was just fine. Each bedroom had two beds, there was ample room to move around, and the kitchen and bathroom had all the necessary appliances and amenities.

Immediately after dropping off our bags, we hit the streets in search of dinner and drinks. Our location could not have been better for cheap ethnic food, and we returned again and again to two nearby Chinese restaurants, one for homemade dumpling soup ($3.50) and the other for dumplings ($2.50) and Chinese sesame pancakes ($2.50). These spots were particularly great for late night meals, especially after cocktails. Both were delicious, and obviously very cheap.

The next day we started out on foot. I had brought along an article from the New York Times on walking the neighborhoods of New York, and additionally brought the Lonely Planet Guide for New York City, which includes lots of recommended walks as well. With the help of these two guides, we trekked through Greenwich Village, Chelsea, Brooklyn, The Upper East Side, the Highline, and much more over the next four days. We loaded onto an iPhone a Museum of Modern Art walking tour of Jacob Lawrence’s Harlem. With a history of Lawrence, and stories of how Harlem inspired him as a young painter, we followed its lead to dazzling murals in the Harlem Hospital and the Harlem YMCA, as well as a beautiful exhibit at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, entitled Black Life Matters. It also led us past the historic Apollo Theater, and to a tasty southern-style soul food lunch.

We enjoyed a great morning in Brooklyn. The area of Brooklyn Heights boasts beautiful brownstones, stunning views, and the lovely East River Promenade. Our walking route ended with a stroll across the splendidly elegant Brooklyn Bridge and back into Manhattan. It was fascinating to walk through a park in the ritzy Brooklyn Heights neighborhood, and see both nannies and fashionable mothers caring for young children. The two did not mix—the mothers sat on one end of the park, in the company of other mothers, while the nannies sat apart, in the company of other nannies.

On our roundabout walk to the 9/11 Memorial Plaza, we happened upon the African Burial Ground National Monument, in lower Manhattan. The burial grounds were discovered in 1991, when a federal office building was being constructed. Over the next two years, 419 skeletal remains were exhumed, but after much protest, Congress stopped construction to make certain the remains were being respectfully cared for. The 419 remains were then buried back where they were found in 2003, in mahogany coffins from Ghana, and a national landmark was born. Today the monument includes a small but captivating museum, and an outdoor memorial to recognize the free and enslaved Africans and their descendants who were buried there long ago.

We didn’t have time for the 9/11 Museum, but we did make it to the Memorial—a beautiful and moving tribute to the people who died on September 11, 2001. Its two cascading pools are surrounded by bronze parapets that list the names of every person who died on that day.

Yes, our trip was four full days, but we really only scratched the surface of New York City and its iconic neighborhoods—even with walking an average of 12 miles each day. We did see a small slice of New York life however, and I’d be happy to put on my walking shoes and go back for more—just as soon as my shin splints get better.

Notes:

Chinatown Eateries — Homemade Dumpling, 27A Essex Street, and Vanessa’s Dumpling House, 118 Eldridge Street. I loved dumpling soup at Homemade Dumpling, and the ham and egg Chinese sesame pancake at Vanessa’s. Most of the employees at Vanessa’s are not very friendly—at all—but the food is very good and very cheap, so try and overlook the crankiness.

Harlem Soul Food — Amy Ruth’s, 113 W 116th Street, great fried chicken and cornbread.

“What does it mean to pre-board! Do you get on before you get on?” —GEORGE CARLIN
India......

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with a tub nearly big enough to play water polo in. Breakfast was included, and from the rooftop restaurant Mehrangarh Fort loomed directly above. All this for about $75 a night split four ways!

In and around the Sardar Market, we braved the crowds and haggled for spices at Maharani Spices, sipped saffron lassis (a nice, light milkshake-like yogurt drink) and each devoured a large green chili, packed with ground chicken and spices, dipped in batter and deep-fried. It was 13 rupees (20 cents) of culinary brilliance.

From our hotel, it was a short walk up a steep hill to the Fort. Mehrangarh boasts fabulous collections of royal howdahs (elephant saddles) and palanquins, which are the ornate boxes in which royals are transported luxuriously by their servant’s muscle and stamina. Its armory displays all manner of swords, knives, axes, shields, and just about anything else one could have needed for protection or aggression over the centuries. Wandering its courtyards and lavishly decorated chambers, touching its cannonball scarred walls and massive anti-elephant spiked doors, and standing on its ramparts, beholding the beautiful and bustling pastel Blue City below, I couldn’t help but imagine what it must have been like to be a royal, servant or foot soldier of Rajasthan’s glorious, bloody past.

India is continually captivating. We ended our trip in the walled city of Bikaner, where we spent a good portion of our final day standing near its main entrance, the Kote Gate. You don’t have to stay for very long in a busy spot like this to see pretty much everything. The entertainment was non-stop. We saw camels, cows, oxen, dogs, and even an elephant. There were infants, toddlers, school children, and the elderly, all getting on with their day. Women brightly clad in saris swept past us, carrying huge baskets on their heads. And every conveyance, from hand pulled carts to bicycles, and from scooters and motorcycles to every size of truck imaginable—carrying oftentimes impossibly large loads—rolled and rumbled by us in every direction. Stands stacked high with fresh fruit and vegetables dotted the area while carts and shops made chai, sweets, lassis, and deep-fried, delectably flaky puff pastries filled with veggies and topped with spicy sauces. Small retail shops abounded and offered everything from children’s toys to consumer electronics. The contrast to our organized and orderly western cities is just extraordinary. There was even a sidewalk dentist. True story.

Prior to this trip, when dreaming of traveling to India, I always thought that it would only be bearable if I were able to return to the comforts of a plush western hotel at the end of every day—as though India were a somewhat harrowing theme park that I would like to leave at the end of each day. Turns out I was wrong. I couldn’t get enough of being out and about, wandering the streets and alleys, day or night, and right smack dab in the middle of it all.

—Bob Bestor is the co-owner of Travel Essentials. He thinks cricket (like baseball) should be played outdoors and dentistry should be practiced indoors.