

YL Meet in India

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I recently returned from India after attending the 8th International YL Meeting, held in Mumbai. The meeting went off very well under the direction of Sarla, VU2SWS, and I am now trying to sort out my impressions of the trip.

Shortly after arriving in Mumbai, I joined my Norwegian YL friends, Unni and Ingrid, on the back seat (actually only meant for 2 people) of a tuk-tuk to go shopping. Everyone should have the experience at least once in their lifetime of riding in a tuk-tuk, best described as a 3-wheeled vehicle with a loud (and I mean loud) horn driven by a madman who thinks he owns the road. There must be thousands of tuk-tuks in India, all converging at the same spot at the same time. Alternatively you can travel by rickshaw pulled by man or beast, though personally I preferred hiring a car and a driver with good reflexes, a loud horn and a heavy foot on the brake.

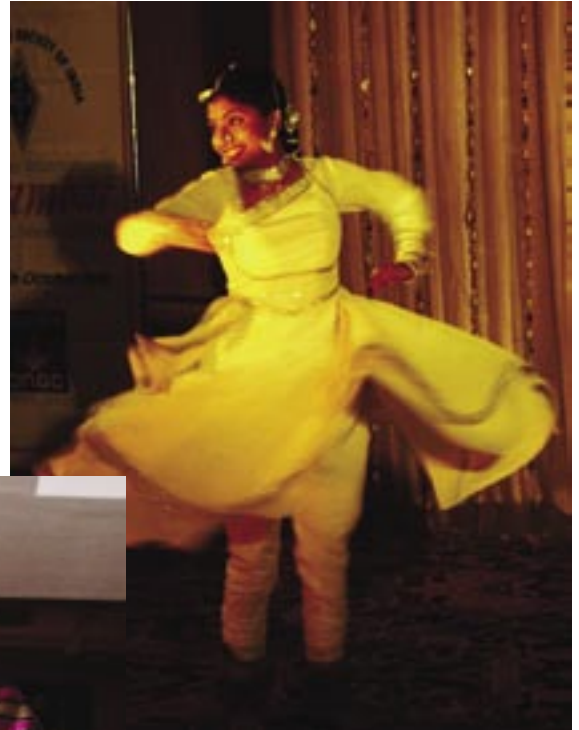
Beggars – very persistent in trying to sell you things you don't want. Some even employed monkeys to cling to a car window in the hope passengers would open it so the monkeys could reach inside and help themselves to cameras or purses.

Street stalls selling everything from fruit and vegetables to blocks of marble. Pharmacies and doctors operating from "hole in the wall" shops. Slum areas worse than I'd seen in Bangkok or anywhere. In Mumbai, we saw a Dhobi Ghat, a square ½ kilometre of cement stalls where washermen pound garments to what seems like pulp to get them clean, employing about 10,000 people to wash, dry, iron and deliver the cleaned clothes – what a sight looking down from an overhead bridge on all this activity as rows of racks flutter with drying laundry.

Lots of temples and ruins of once-great palaces. All with many steps to climb in the heat! The first sight of the Taj Mahal, described as the most extravagant monument ever built for love and which has become India's de facto tourist emblem, was all I wanted it to be – well, except for those innumerable steps and the fact that I had decided, in advance, to see it at sunset when the inside was so dark that one couldn't see all the beautiful intricate

marble carving! However, next day I was taken to a marble workshop where I saw how the marble was quarried, cut and inlaid with precious stones from all round the world. How I would have loved to buy one of those tabletops but, having bought a carpet in Varanasi (and which I had to carry home!), I decided "no way!"

Varanasi – I had seen many pictures of people



A dancer at a function at the YL Meet.



Gwen dressed up for festivities

bathing in the Ganges and wanted to see it for myself, so early one morning a YL guide collected me and we travelled by boat up and down the river past the Ghats where literally hundreds of people were already congregating to bathe in the river. I only saw one dead body being prepared for cremation – that was enough for me so I lit a little candle and floated it in the river with many others for good luck, then back up those numerous steps, past the numerous beggars and back to my hotel for breakfast. Then off to buy my carpet!

I used various means of transport during the trip, including planes, cars, buses, a train, a tuk-tuk, bicycle-rickshaw and wheelchair (I'd twisted my knee before leaving home!), the latter involving a forklift truck to get me up into a plane! I refused rides on camels and elephants, having "been there, done that" in other countries.

My most memorable trip was when Sarla arranged for us to visit Elephanta

Island in Mumbai Harbour. This involved an hour's ride in a launch and then a short ride in a miniature train to the foot of the stairway leading up to the caves to view the stone carvings dating back to between AD 450 and 750. For someone like me who didn't feel capable of climbing those steps lined with handicraft stalls and patrolled by pesky monkeys, it was decided I should travel upwards in a palanquin (like a sedan chair), a seat balanced on 2 long poles of wood resting on the shoulders of 4 stalwart Indians. Oh dear! I resisted the impulse to give a Queenly wave as I by-passed people toiling their way up/down the steps. Coming down backwards was a trifle frightening and I wondered how many passengers had been dropped!

Sarla also took us to see Mahatma Gandhi's house (with a wonderful diorama of his life – and later I was to see the beautiful garden where his ashes are buried); a meal in a revolving restaurant (with a view of the cricket ground!). Sarla dressed up all the YLs in saris; and provided evening entertainment of two first-class dance troupes. A radio room was provided, plus a special QSL card, but I didn't get time to operate. And a special postage stamp was printed to commemorate our visit.

Weatherwise it did not rain, was hot and muggy but bearable with lots of air-conditioned buildings. Good to reasonable hotels; too much spicy food for my stomach; lots of kindness shown me by local guides who had to help me up those steps, and not one harsh word to me on the day Aussie beat India at the one-day cricket match while I was there (grin!).



A tuk-tuk & other traffic.



Washing.



Beside the Ganges, early morning.

My thanks go to Sarla for inviting us to India for the Meeting, and to my travel agent for arranging the rest of my trip. Where next?

Editor's Note: My apologies to Gwen – this contribution somehow was missed. It has been sitting lost in my Inbox for far too long. Better late than never!

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