Fifty Days in India: the Good, the Bad, the Wish We Didn't Miss

by Dan Levesque *on* June 24, 2019

Writing about our trip to India has felt like a gargantuan task. Even after traveling the country for fifty days, India is still such a complicated place to understand and discuss. Here, I'm going to attempt to give the definitive version of it all—what India was really like (for us), all of the good with all of the bad.

India has stuck with us, maybe partially because we got engaged at the Taj Mahal. After 50 days of travelling the country, from the southern state of Kerala up to the northern state

of Himachal Pradesh, we left India not sure if we would ever go back. Now, in hindsight, going back to India seems like something we absolutely **must** do in the future. India has got us hooked, and it's got us dreaming.

This post is about our overall experience travelling India: the good, the bad, the things we wish we could have done a little bit differently.

Good #1: India is unlike any other place.

Having been to China, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia, it's safe to say that India doesn't compare to any of them. China seems to operate like a different planet. In comparison, India operates like a different dimension—some strange, alternate reality that constantly contradicts itself. It's a land of beauty and destruction all at once, a place of tranquility surrounded by constant chaos. Everything is juxtaposed with everything else, so there's nothing solid to hold onto.

The sun setting over Agra, India. The Taj Mahal is in the background.

This experience is what makes India so exciting: it's a place where you can truly transform your perspective. As much as we prepared and did our research in advance, it was impossible to know what it would actually feel like being on the ground. Having been through it, describing it is equally difficult. I could easily write two separate posts diving deeper into the good sides and the bad sides of India, but it's more fitting to do it all at once.

Bad #1: It's hot.

I thought I knew what hot was. I was wrong. Having experienced 40 degrees Celsius every day for a solid two months in China, I had expected a similar experience going to India. But this was totally different.

Taking a local train in India, covered in sweat because it's so hot.

India has a different kind of heat—the humidity leading up to the Monsoon season is unbelievable. We travelled through South India in May, which by all accounts is the worst time to go. The heat was our constant nemesis, and followed us everywhere we went. locals who had lived in the region their entire lives complained about how hot it was. One of our hosts described it best: it's too hot to think. Coming from a person who grew up in India, that's quite a statement.

It's strange to look back on our time in Kerala (in Southwest India), because my overwhelming memory is that of a persistent, uncomfortable heat. Your body is hot and sweaty, the air is humid—you can't cool down, you can't stay dry. Your only hope is to hide away in an air-conditioned room in order to restore yourself to some semblance of normal. But once that's been accomplished, it gets washed away the moment you step outdoors and start walking down the street again.

Going in, our plan was to take the heat head on. Rather than hiding away in an air-conditioned room, we spent our first week in Kerala—in May—without any air conditioning. 35 degrees Celsius, full humidity, with just open windows and a fan (and when things got really bad, a wet cloth) to keep us cool.

Our non-AC hotbox of a room, with just a fan and the occasional breeze to cool us down.

This made sleeping really difficult and uncomfortable (the bed was wet with sweat and humidity), but the idea was to acclimate to the heat rather than fight against it. This ended up sort of helping, but it probably wasn't worth the suffering overall.

One day, after going for a swim in the ocean to cool down (which helped a little bit), I was already sweating again by the time we got back to our hostel (a full two minutes walk up from the beach). Since our accommodation had an outdoor shower with cold water, I thought I'd try standing in it for a while to help cool down. While standing under that cool running water, I felt immediately cool and clear—I could think again! I was a normal functioning human once more! As soon as I turned off the cold shower and headed to the common area, I was back to being hot and sweating in the time it took to walk upstairs and plop down in front of the fan. When the humidity is that intense, even cold water doesn't keep you cool—the heat of the air immediately transfers over to your body.

The defeated look of a man who's lost his soul to the heat of India.

Leaving the humidity of South India, we found our way up north in the desert state of Punjab—a blisteringly dry 45 degrees Celsius during the day. This somehow seemed more bearable than the lower heat and extreme humidity of the South, with one major difference: the wind in the desert was so hot and dry that it was suffocating. Riding in a rickshaw was like having a hair dryer turned on full blast at your face. It was so hot during the day that air conditioning stopped working at some points, unable to fight against the onslaught of the heat.

That's my "India is hot!" story. The heat definitely made doing things more difficult, and we generally had to avoid being out in the heat too long or over-exerting ourselves. Managing the heat was a constant battle that we could never realistically have won. If you're planning a trip to India at some point, stay away during the summer/monsoon period. As things heat up in the summer, Indians tend to head for the mountainous regions to escape the heat—that's the only reprieve (ie. go to the Himalayas or, if you're in the South, to the Western Ghats). The one benefit of this heat is that there are **far less** tourists around at this time, and for good reason: it's impossible to do anything!

Visiting the Golden Temple of Amritsar in 45 degrees Celsius (113 Fahrenheit), drenched in sweat. Note that I'm walking quite gingerly on the marble because it's burning my feet.

We wish we could have experienced India when the temperatures were more modest and we could actually get out and see the things. You know it's a bad sign when even Indians themselves tell you that it's too hot and not to go in the Summer months—I can tell you from first hand experience that they're right. Next time, we'll try getting ourselves to India between September and March—when the weather in most of the country is at its best.

Good #2: The food!

The experience of eating in India is also different from anywhere else—it's traditional to eat with your hand (the clean one), without using cutlery. We didn't abide by this most of the time, but it does give you a more primal connection to the food you're eating.

A traditional-looking Indian thali, made up of rice, bread, and several different smaller dishes.

As India is the land of juxtapositions, there's also a combination of simplicity and complexity when it comes to food: simple ingredients like potatoes, lentils, tomatoes, cauliflower, and/or rice are usually prepared with a complex set of spices and herbs. This gives Indian cuisine a flavour you can't get anywhere else.
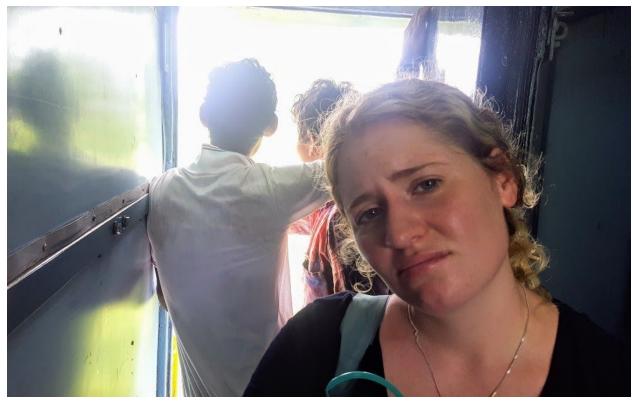
As with everything else in India, there's a huge amount of diversity here, and I don't feel confident in my ability to give a good overview of the wide range of options that are available. India helped push us towards going fully vegetarian; now, with our renewed focus on veganism, it would be fun to go back to India and dive a little bit deeper into the food.

Going back, we would probably take some cooking classes, do some more research on different cuisines in different regions, and try being full-fledged foodies for vegan Indian food. We did also discover one of our favourite cuisines of all time in India: Tibetan. With a strong influence throughout the Himalayas, Tibetan food is incredibly delicious and hearty, and can be found all over the place in India—thukpa and momos all day, thanks!

Bad #2: It's dirty!

Again with the juxtapositions—there's this fantastic food everywhere you go, but basic hygiene practices are questionable. Food hygiene just isn't as much of a concern in other parts of Asia (specifically thinking about Thailand and Vietnam, for example). But in India, the street food and even many of the restaurants are intimidating and not very accessible to the un-initiated—it's really hard to know what's good and safe to eat.

We often saw people walking around selling food that may or may not have been sitting out in the direct sunlight all day long. At bus stops, train stops, and food stalls throughout the cities, it's impossible to know whether the food you're considering trying is safe for consumption. The difficulty of finding sanitary toilets makes the thought of taking risk just that much more unsettling—being sick on a bus or train for hours on end does not make for a fun day of travel.

Having a bit of a day on a train in India. This photo was right after noticing that water from the train's bathroom was leaking out onto the floor and soaking onto our bags...

We did get sick in India. We stayed in Hampi, Karnataka, in central India so that we could spend a few days exploring the ancient ruins there. We were also there during the low (hot) season, which meant a fair number of restaurants were closed and we were stuck with what remained open when tourism was slow. The availability of hygienic food quickly became a problem, and we ended up having a meal that made us feel a bit off. The next day, we had the pleasure of an 8-hour train ride (which became closer to 12 hours due to delays).

Once we arrived at our destination city (Goa), we went and got dinner from a place we'd previously eaten at and was delicious. This time, the food wasn't as good—it also wasn't very hot when it showed up. Since we hadn't had any problems previously, we ate it—that made us feel even worse. The following day was **another** day of train travel (from Goa to Mumbai), which we somehow made it through. Upon arriving in Mumbai, we had the worst food poisoning experience of our lives and remained shut up in our tiny closet-sized room (one of the cheapest hotel options in downtown Mumbai) for most of the three days

we had there. Apart from one day of exploring, we saw almost nothing of Mumbai (and ate even less).

A train station in India. These could be particularly bad because most train toilets release directly onto the train tracks. You're not supposed to go number two while in the train station, but some people still do...

This was the worst food-related illness we experienced in India. In this case, we're pretty sure it was a double-whammy of back-to-back questionable meals that really did us in, and both times we're pretty sure the food in question was from a restaurant we'd previously eaten at and been fine. Both times we had a weird feeling about the food but trusted it based on our previous experience. Lesson learned: you may think something's going to be alright, but always trust your gut (or your gut will suffer!).

Another hygiene-related concern is the accommodation itself, which can be a bit hit or miss. Compared to a lot of places in Southeast Asia, you don't get a lot of value for your money when it comes to accommodation in India. In Vietnam, for example, we could spend $15 USD for a room that was spotless, had clean bedding and a comfy bed, was regularly cleaned, and would usually include a pool. In India, spending $20 USD would get you a

room that starts off a little bit dirty, may not have clean sheets when you arrive (sometimes you have to ask them to put on clean ones), and may or may not have working facilities (a lot of things in India seem to be in some state of disrepair).

Going back to India, one thing we would definitely change is spending a little bit more on accommodation from time to time. Sometimes, splurging a little bit on a hotel with a full bathtub or at least a good, clean shower is ja good idea. After several weeks of travelling India with mediocre showers and not the cleanest rooms, you really feel the need to get clean and start fresh. Though, as with the heat, as soon as you do get clean and step outside, you'll probably be inundated with the dust and dirt and no longer feel clean—but those precious few seconds in between might be just what you need.

A tuk tuk through the congested streets of Amritsar, India.

We would also probably spend a bit more time (and money) seeking out delicious and hygienic food. A street food walking tour would probably be a great idea, especially to help with the comfort level and understanding what to look for. Indian street food isn't all

created equal, and jumping in can be overwhelming when you have to consider the risk of getting ill.

Good #3: Diversity.

India is a shockingly diverse country, full of different cultures, languages, religions, and ethnic groups. The truth is, after 50 days, we barely uncovered any of it. From the tropical heat of the South, to the deserts of the Northwest, the isolated Himalayan towns of the North, to the Bengal region in the East—India is a melting pot, and seeing the people change from region to region was an eye-opening experience.

A beach in Kerala, the southernmost state of India.

Indians themselves will tell you about this diversity, saying how different people are in different areas of their own country. The culture, cuisine, languages, and ethnic groups all

change as you move across the country, so there's an endless opportunity to see and learn about new parts of the country.

A boat ride through the backwater jungles of Kerala.

Somehow, all of this diversity gets held together under a common thread—everyone seems to recognize themselves as being Indian, despite the huge variance between the people in different regions. Going on further about the diversity of India is more of a sociology/anthropology/history lesson, and I'm definitely not qualified to start getting into that. So I'll just leave it at this: India is far more diverse than we realized going in.

Going back, it would be good to start off more knowledgeable and well-versed about the different places in India and the history behind what we now know as "India." I'd done a fair amount of research prior to arrival (probably more than any other country I've been to), but it was a much different experience actually being there and talking to the people we met. More knowledge about India and more talking to locals would probably go a long way in getting to understand this crazy place.

Bad #3: India is too big.

Forgive us for feeling a little bit lost in this huge country of India.

The reason you see so much diversity throughout India is that it's such a huge country. "I went to India" is akin to saying "I went to Southeast Asia"—the question is: right, but **where**? If you go to Thailand, you're probably going to Bangkok and then either down south to the islands or up north into the jungle (or both). If you go to Vietnam, you're probably starting in either Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh and then travelling between the two, seeing everything in between. But, if you go to India, you could be talking about going to the Himalayas in the north, or going down south where it's a fully tropical climate, or to the deserts of the northwest, or far to the northeast where India borders Myanmar and Bangladesh, or anywhere in between.

Not just geographically huge, India also has a massive population—the number of people moving through the country at any given time also makes travel more challenging.

Just saying that you've been to India really doesn't do the country justice. Our goal with this trip was to see as much of India as possible—but fifty days is not enough time to get the full experience of this place. The time investment required to travel in India is going to be a barrier to entry for a lot of people. Most tourists do the golden triangle—Delhi, Agra, and Jaipur—which might then afford a little bit of time to head off to Goa or Mumbai as well. While this is certainly a good place to start, it's only a small taste of what India has to offer. This region is also relatively homogenous—there's not a lot of diversity when sticking to these main tourist-friendly hubs, and a lot of the cultural experience is lost as a result.

On our trip, we started down south in the state of Kerala—right near the very southern point of India. From there, we worked our way up to Munnar and Kochi, from where we took a long train ride to Goa. After some time in Goa, we took another train deep into rural Karnataka to visit the ruins of Hampi, then took a train back to Goa and up to Mumbai (where we became incapacitated with a food illness). From Mumbai, we flew all the way up north to Amritsar (where the Sikh Golden Temple is located), skipping everything in

between. We then bussed up into the Himalayas and spent ten days in Mcleod Ganj, before bussing back to Amritsar to catch our plane out of India.

The ruins of Hampi, India.

That was our fifty days in a nutshell. We got a fairly good taste of Kerala, but still feel we could have spent more time there (especially outside of monsoon season). We could have spent more time in Goa as well, and we saw practically nothing of Mumbai. We didn't get to explore much of Punjab outside of Amritsar, and really wish we had more time to explore the Himalayan region more in-depth.

Part of what makes India so difficult to write about is that, even after spending so much time there, it seems as though we've seen so little. There's still so much left to see, and this is what makes it incredibly challenging to truly wrap your head around this place. India is more a place you go to have an experience than a place you go to visit.

A view overlooking the ruins of Hampi.

Because of its size and the amount of things there are to see, getting the full India experience isn't easy. Going back, we absolutely want to see the eastern coast of India, Varanasi, Rajasthan, and more of the Himalayas—and especially the northeastern provinces. There's so much to see and experience that it's impossible to fit it all in on one trip. Having this much to see is certainly a pro, but the challenge of actually seeing it all makes it seem like an almost impossible task.

Good #4: The culture and energy of the people.

I've mentioned culture a few times now, and that's because India is such a culturally rich country. It's common while traveling to come across places and people that are relatively similar to other places you've been and people you've met—this gives you a way of grounding your experience by comparing it to something similar. India isn't like that—it's a place like no other.

We had thought our experience of China would prepare us for what India would be like, seeing as how they're both huge countries with large populations and their own unique customs. While I'm sure this previous exposure helped in dealing with all of the crowds, there really isn't any comparison.

Blending in with the Sikh people at the Golden Temple.

India is vibrant and bustling with activity. There's a constant buzz around the country, a mix of relaxed serenity juxtaposed with the chaos of daily life. One way to describe it is as a never ending "Om" meditation chant continually playing as a background ambience, with the constant honking of cars and rickshaws as the unrelenting beat. The uniqueness of this experience is what makes it so rich and impactful—you simply can't get it anywhere else.

At one point, Janice got kidnapped in Kerala for photos and I almost had to leave her.

We also met more unique individuals in a relatively short amount of time than anywhere else we've been—just getting to meet people and talk to them was one of the highlights of this trip. You'll find people who are extremely open and welcoming, willing to talk to you about a wide range of topics (although you'll also find the opposite) and to shed some light on their huge and complicated country. Going back, it would be nice to take more time to talk to the locals and delve deeper into India's diverse culture.

Bad #4: The culture of oppression.

In juxtaposition to my last point, the patriarchal culture of India also makes it more difficult to talk to the locals and feel immersed in the culture. India is a male-dominated culture, and women simply have a more difficult time traveling here. I noticed this first-hand while walking with Janice: we would get quite a lot of stares and people would pay a lot of attention to us just while walking down the street. It was only on a few

occasions while out walking alone that I realized: nobody was looking at me, trying to stop me, or talking to me as I passed.

On a trek through the mountains with a group of Indians we met on the trail.

Things seem to be changing in India, but change takes time. Women simply aren't given the same social status as men, and often times it's the husband of the household who takes social precedence (ie. when eating a meal at a homestay, the man of the household would eat with us while his wife worked in the kitchen). There's also that troublesome caste system that still carries a lot of weight. Coming from a country where people are born equal and treated equal regardless of their social status of "class," it's strange interacting with a culture where that simply isn't the case.

I'm not sure what we could do differently next time, so if somebody has any suggestions, please let us know. Maybe there's something we can do to either avoid the stares or navigate through the male-dominated culture in a more pleasant way?
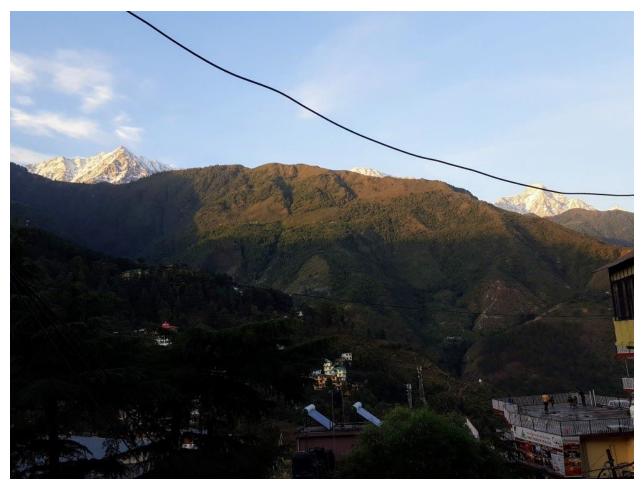

Good #5: The natural beauty.

Epic view from a mountain in Munnar.

There are an astounding number of beautiful places in India: tropical beaches, jungles, deserts, ice-capped mountains—the options are limitless. This is a far cry from the India that usually gets portrayed on the global stage: the media typically shows crowded cities and pollution intermingled with slums and poor rural communities, while images of India's diverse landscape are in short supply. But India has far more to offer than overpopulation and rampant poverty.

The problem is that India's natural beauty is primarily hidden away in separate geographical regions, meaning they're not readily accessible unless you're in the right place (remember, India is a huge place). Most of the deserts are in the northwestern border region near Pakistan. The glaciated mountains are all in the north, bordering China. The tropical beaches are all down south. Moving between these regions can require some significant travel time, so it's likely that any shorter trip to India will mean seeing a very small part of the natural beauty that India has to offer.

Looking up at the towering Himalayan mountain range near Mcleod Ganj.

If I could only travel to one country for the rest of my life, I may have to choose India. I loved spending time in the Himalayas and can't wait to go back—but I also loved traveling along the tropical coastline and everywhere in between. Having one country provide both of these options (and more) is truly something special. Going back, we would definitely take the time to explore more of India's largely untapped natural beauty.

Bad #5: Disregard for the environment.

Despite India's natural beauty, the general public doesn't seem to care much about their surroundings or how their actions negatively affect the environment. As a result, you'll frequently find trash and plastic litter on beaches, discarded into nature (even in protected parks), and clogging up streams. Wastewater typically flows into streams and

rivers, polluting the water source for millions of people (and releasing toxins into the environment).

Trash discarded and burning in the outskirts of Amritsar.

The mismanagement of waste is a gigantic problem in India (although this is also a problem in many parts of the world, it's ramped up to another level in India), and you'll encounter it everywhere you go.

Conclusion:

This is as definitive as a guide as I'm able to produce, based on 50 days spent traveling in India. There's a lot we could have done better, a lot left to see, and so much that we miss about India.

On the one hand, India is unlike anywhere else: it's an extremely diverse country, it's culture and cuisine have an incredible depth, and there's no shortage of things to see and

do. On the other hand, India is hot, dirty, and a difficult place to travel in—even for the seasoned traveller.

As long as you're up for the challenge and willing to get out of your comfort zone, I would highly recommend giving India a try. This is especially true for anyone who's already travelled in Southeast Asia before and is looking to get a little bit more adventurous. For us, India is a place we can't wait to revisit in the future.