

First Time in India – 1991

In February of 1991, I traveled to India for the first time to conduct a GIS marketing seminar for the Esri-India office (IDM) in New Delhi. My trip began with Delta Airline flights from Ontario Airport to Atlanta and on to London Gatwick Airport. Both flights were very pleasant as I was upgraded to business class. Early the next morning, I arrived at Gatwick Airport during a snowstorm! Although I had almost three hours to make the transfer to Heathrow Airport for my next flight to India, I needed every minute of it. The “luxury” shuttle bus to Heathrow was delayed by snow, icy roads, and heavy morning commuter traffic. When I finally got to Heathrow, the route to Terminal 3 was a very long, circuitous journey through a “maze” of roads, which meant that I arrived just in time to board the Air India flight. At last, I boarded the 747, but only after I had passed through no less than three very thorough security checks! Earlier, when I had exchanged my money at Gatwick Airport, I was in for a shock – the rate was \$2.18 for 1 British Pound! *[by comparison, today’s rate is \$1.27 for 1 British Pound]*

The flight to Bombay was very long (9 ½ hours), but it was very pleasant in business class, with lots of beautiful Indian classical music on the onboard entertainment system. A delicious dinner of traditional lamb curry and basmati rice was served as we flew over the Baltic Sea, central Russia, Tashkent, and Afghanistan. We landed in Bombay at 2:30am local time (1:00pm California time – the day before!), after two meals and three movies! Once I was in the Bombay Airport, I spent a couple of hours relaxing in the Air India Executive Lounge as I waited for the departure of the flight to New Delhi. However, once I was onboard, there was a 4 hour delay due to “mechanical issues” – and since it was a very full flight, I had to pity the poor passengers that were squeezed into the coach section! (The flight was scheduled to go to London and on to New York, which led me to think, “what a way to start an 11-hour journey”!) Once we were airborne, the flight was smooth and the service was very good, at least in business class. I arrived in New Delhi about 11:00am (10:30pm California time – the previous day!) and to my surprise, I breezed through Immigration and Customs. Fortunately, the exchange rate in India was much better than in England. Although the arrival formalities were fairly efficient, I couldn’t help noticing the Indian “passion” for “myriads” of paperwork that presented itself in the form of “copies of copies”!

I was also fortunate that N.K., the director of Esri-India, had arranged for a car to pick me up at the airport. The driver met me outside the Arrivals Hall carrying a sign – “Mr. Handerson AI111”, so I figured that had to be me, and strangely he was wearing a light blue jacket from Delta Airlines! Then he took me to the “Taj Mahal Hotel”, a beautiful 5-star luxury hotel in the center of the city. The ride to the hotel was “crazy” as we drove through wild, chaotic traffic with no “apparent” rules of the road, at least as far as I could tell. There were lots of honking of horns, speeding motorbikes, pedestrians desperately trying to avoid getting run over, old terribly crowded buses, and “holy cows” in the middle of the road who seemed content to ignore everyone and everything! Meanwhile, in the middle of all the chaos, large lorries (trucks) struggled to move. (Their cab was cut off and replaced by elaborate colorfully painted wooden structures, and scrawled on the rear of virtually every lorry was “Blow Horn” and “OK-TA-TA”. I had no idea why?) Meanwhile, they continued to belch out huge volumes of thick, black diesel smoke. As we continued toward the hotel, there were constant “near misses” as daring motorbikes dashed headlong into crowded “roundabouts”, challenging everyone for the right of way. It was sheer madness!



Later we passed by an area of beautiful wide boulevards lined with gorgeous old trees, but unfortunately, the smog was pretty bad! When we finally arrived at the hotel, I walked into a lobby decorated with gorgeous white marble and exotic teakwood.



“Taj Mahal Hotel” – New Delhi

After checking into a lovely room where a complimentary amenity of fresh fruit and savory snacks awaited me, courtesy of the hotel general manager, I called N.K. to coordinate the schedule of my visit. It took him over a half hour to respond as he was driving in heavy traffic, but eventually he met me at the hotel, and we drove to the Esri-India office where I gave the GIS software computer tapes to Pradeep to install on the mini-computer to prepare for the demos the next day. Then N.K. took me to lunch in the office “canteen” where I enjoyed a delicious dish of traditional Chicken Tikka Masala. N.K. was worried that it might be too spicy, but it was fantastic! After lunch, I returned to the hotel and “crashed” for a couple of hours before joining N.K. later for another meeting in his office that turned into a couple of hours of work helping Pradeep install the software. (Being that India was 13 ½ hours ahead of California time, the “jet lag” was rapidly creeping up on me) Following the meeting with N.K., he graciously offered to drive me back to the hotel. But like most cars in India, his car seemed to run somehow in spite of itself! Back in the hotel, I headed to the “Emperor Lounge” for a cold pint of “Black Label”, a premium Indian beer. Meanwhile, a string quartet played classical European music, mostly Mozart and Schubert. Then, all of a sudden, they changed to traditional Indian music on their violins and cello – the sound was beautiful and in keeping with the heritage of India.



“Emperor Lounge” – Taj Mahal Hotel

At the same time, I struck up a conversation with one of the servers who later invited the leader of the quartet to join my table – we talked for quite some time about music. Very enjoyable conversation. About the same time, a large party began outside by the pool with lots of traditional Indian music and dancing, as well as some impressive fireworks! It appeared to be a group of managers and staff from the Lexington Hotel in New York. Later in the evening, I returned to my room and turned the TV to CNN to see the latest world news.

Early the next morning, I was up with the sun as it rose above the haze hanging over New Delhi. I could see a group of giant vultures already stretching their wings when all of a sudden something caught their attention, and they all began moving in one direction.



Sunrise in New Delhi

After breakfast in the hotel, a driver from Esri-India (IDM) picked me up and drove to the office where I ended up spending over 12 hours trying to overcome some fundamental computer system configuration problems. It was a most frustrating experience when it was assumed by everyone in the office that I was the “most knowledgeable”, while at the same time, I didn’t even know what the problems were! And to compound the situation, it was the weekend and no one else was available! (ah, the joys of working in the third world!) At some point during the day, we had lunch in the “canteen”, which was pretty basic Indian food but quite tasty. Again, N.K. worried that it would be too spicy, but not to worry.

At last, I managed to solve the computer system problems and Pradeep volunteered to take me back to the hotel. But this time he hailed a “rickshaw” since he couldn’t find a taxi in the late evening. If I thought a trip by car in the heavy chaotic traffic was scary, the ride in the open rickshaw was literally “terrifying”! At last, we arrived back at the hotel, and I was lucky to find the lobby café still open. As I enjoyed a late dinner of “mutton potato chops” and a cold Kingfisher Lager beer, I watched a large group entering the lobby. The Indian women were beautifully dressed in their finest silk saris and gold jewelry, while the Sikh men wore large colorful turbans. Later I found out it was a wedding party.

I spent most of the following day working on my laptop computer in my hotel room to prepare for the GIS marketing seminar the next day. That evening, I had dinner in the hotel at the “Captain’s Cabin Pub” that was designed to be the interior of an old sailing ship – beautiful and very authentic. The fish and chips were spot on and delicious, along with a cold bottle of “Black Friar’s Lager”. As I was enjoying dinner, I noticed two elderly British guys at the bar “yucking it up” over a bottle of wine. I could hear them from across the room and one of them sounded just like Michael Caine! At another table nearby was a small group of German tourists, and it was a bit strange to hear German being spoken in India where everything is so British!

Early the next morning, N.K. picked me up at the hotel and we drove to the Sheraton Hotel where the GIS seminar would be held. The setup was very nice with two large meeting rooms, one for the formal presentations and the other for the computer equipment and demos. As the sound system was being “adjusted”, resulting in incredibly loud screeching noises, I “struggled” to fix a bug in the main demo – not off to a good start! The “big brass” started to arrive about 9:30am with lots of colonels and generals from the Indian Army Headquarters, many of whom wore elaborate turbans – easily recognized as Sikhs. Fortunately, my presentation and demo went quite well and at the end there were a lot of questions – always a good sign that they were interested in what I had presented. And at the end, I received several compliments. (Little did they know about the “Chinese Fire Drill” the Esri-India staff and I had been through the past couple of days!)



GIS Seminar at the Sheraton Hotel – New Delhi



Jaggi and Me doing GIS software demo



Lunch in the hotel

A sumptuous lunch was catered by the hotel and even included a wonderful apple strudel and ice cream dessert. Later, another group of 25 people showed up for the presentation and demo which also went well, but I had some difficulty understanding the questions from a few of the people because their pronunciation of English sounded so “foreign” to me. After the conclusion of the seminar, I was informed that a visit to the Municipal Telephone Company and a meeting with its director had been arranged for me! (Not what I was looking forward to, rather hoping for a day off) Then, just as we were packing up the equipment and preparing to return to the office, a violent thunderstorm suddenly struck the city with very heavy rain and hail! In a matter of a couple of minutes the streets were flooded, and day turned to night! The storm raged for almost a half hour before diminishing. Ironically, the weather forecast in the morning newspaper had been a “chance of light rain”! For dinner that evening, I went to “Casa Medici”, the rooftop restaurant in the hotel. I was greeted by the hostess who was a gorgeous lady from Assam, with deep brown eyes, who showed me to a nice table in the corner of the room. I ordered one of my favorite Indian dishes, Chicken Murg Masala, and when it arrived at my table there were some very large reddish vegetables on the plate. When I asked the hostess what they were she said “carrots”, which was a surprise to both of us. Later she asked if I would like dessert, so I asked what she thought was the best one on the menu. She told me its name, but it was something I hadn’t heard of before, and she didn’t know how to describe it! Turned out to be a fabulous ice cream cake! During dinner, a quartet played some “oldies but goodies” which was nice, soft background music, and an elderly couple began dancing. Throughout the evening, the service was excellent, very attentive and professional. Dinner concluded with a cup of espresso, served with a tray of chocolates - perfect! I ended the evening in the Captain’s Cabin Pub with a pint of “Old Monk” draft beer. (It felt great to be finished with the seminars!)

Two days later, after a couple of meetings with some of Esri-India most important clients, N.K. said he had arranged a trip for me to the old city of Agra to visit the legendary “Taj Mahal”, which really excited me. I was up early the next morning to meet my guide and the hired car for the drive to Agra. As soon as I got into the old car,

I noticed something strange – the steering wheel was “canted” to one side so that the driver sat at an angle to the road. (Weird) No sooner had we left the hotel than we encountered “horrendous” traffic – lots of buses and heavy trucks spewing massive clouds of black diesel smoke! The road was crowded with everything from cars, vans, bicycles, rickshaws, and scooters to bullock carts, camels, donkeys, horses, and the ever present “holy cows” – what chaos it was! Everyone was trying to grab a piece of the road before someone else did – passing on curves, the shoulder of the road or even the sidewalk, with constant honking of horns and racing towards oncoming traffic! It would scare the shit out of a blind man!! It was like playing “chicken” on the public highway, and we had so many “near misses” in the first few miles that I quit counting!



On the way to Agra

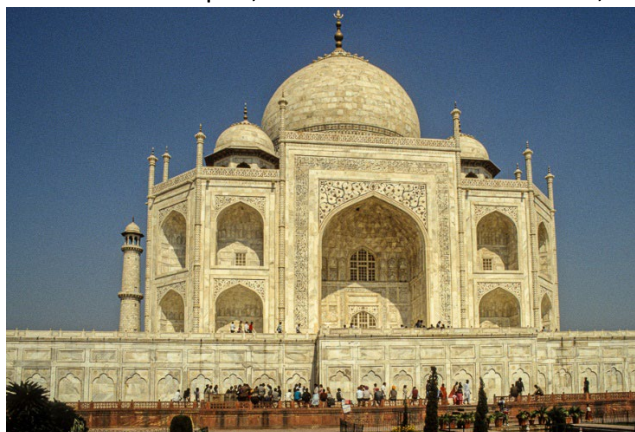
The journey from New Delhi to Agra, a distance of 125 miles, took us over three and a half hours – an average speed of 35 mph, and this was the main highway (expressway?) from New Delhi to Calcutta! Along the way, we passed through three police checkpoints, but I wondered what in the world they were checking for? Surely it couldn't have been for “dangerous” driving! Then, suddenly another car overtook us and as it passed by, to my great surprise, I saw Mr. Yuan from Beijing in the car! Both cars stopped and I exchanged greetings with Mr. Yuan – what a remarkable coincidence as both of us had no idea we were in India at the same time! We took the break in the journey to “relieve” ourselves by the side of the road, as many others also did.

At last, we arrived in Agra and proceeded to the Taj Mahal main gate, and as I entered, my first sight of the Taj Mahal with its brilliant white marble shining under clear blue skies was breathtaking! I stood at the gate transfixed by the spectacular view before me! I was struck by the amazing “symmetry” of the immense structure – the most impressive I've ever seen!



Taj Mahal

As I approached it, I saw the white marble walls inside were inlaid with countless beautiful semi-precious stones. As I walked around the temple that Moghul Emperor Shah Jahan had dedicated to the love for his wife after her death, I felt the peace and tranquility that he sought to achieve with its construction in 1643. My visit to the Taj Mahal remains among the best memories of my travels around the world! From the Taj Mahal, my guide took me to “Agra Fort”, an ancient fortress built of gorgeous red sandstone and white marble on the opposite side of the river from which there was a beautiful view of the Taj Mahal. It was here that the Moghul Emperor lived and kept 5,000 concubines in his harem, as well as 15 “wives”!



Closer view of the Taj Mahal



Agra Fort

After visiting the fortress, we went to a local marble factory where they had gorgeous inlaid work on display – very intricate and complex designs. By now it was time for lunch but finding a restaurant that was open proved to be a real challenge. Finally, my guide and driver discovered the “Kwality Inn” next to “Monalisa Jewelers” and we all enjoyed some very good south Indian food – pretty spicy!

Following lunch, we visited the “Sidankar Mausoleum” where we encountered over 200 Black Faced monkeys running freely around the grounds, including three babies just a few days old! The monkeys were very friendly and readily accepted “handouts” from visitors. According to my guide, tourism was down due to the recent beginning of the “Gulf War”, which turned out to be good for me because the places we visited weren’t crowded. Before leaving Agra, we came upon several elaborate wedding processions, many of which had musical bands with large, very loud speakers mounted on bicycles, as well as beating drums. (Lots of noise – and one procession even had guys carrying huge fluorescent lights on their shoulders that were powered by a massive battery mounted on a donkey cart!) Just as we left Agra, we encountered a very long Muslim funeral procession that stalled traffic, ending up with cars and motorcycles suddenly “jumping” the lane divider and driving down the opposing lane to the dismay of people coming the other way!

The drive back to New Delhi at night was “fricking” hair-raising – I saw four major accidents involving big trucks, one of which was a “head-on” collision with one truck overturned! Throughout the journey, there was constant honking of horns and flicking of headlights, sometimes for no apparent reason, while “near misses” continued. And to add to the anxiety of the experience, our car’s headlights were badly aimed, illuminating only the very far edge of the road, at best! Needless to say, not only was it another scary ride, but it was also even longer than our journey to Agra earlier in the day! Finally, when we returned to New Delhi, my guide “Sanjine” invited me to his home for dinner. It was such a nice gesture to express his concern that I should enjoy the day with him, which I certainly did.

The next day, N.K. suggested that I visit the “Indian National Railway Museum” and arranged for a taxi. The taxi picked me up at the hotel and we arrived at the outdoor museum to find a very hot humid day! I instructed the taxi driver to return in two hours to pick me up, and then I walked around the museum grounds, looking at many classic old steam locomotives and luxury carriages that had been used by the “Maharajahs” during the reign of the Moghul Emperors of the 18th century. In addition to the luxury railroad carriages, there was a very

unique “single track” railroad that used a “sidecar” wheel which ran on the ground alongside the single rail of steel track to “balance” the railroad locomotive – weird!



Single Track Railway



Massive “Mallet” Articulated Locomotive



A Luxury Carriage for a Maharaja



Despite the very hot humid weather, I saw many families enjoying the museum, which was especially popular with the young children. The ride on the miniature railroad around the museum grounds was a highlight for them. One of the most interesting exhibits was the display of a steam locomotive that had been cut in half to show how it worked. Although it was really hot and muggy, I enjoyed the visit to the museum.



Families enjoying train ride



Cut-a-Way display of steam locomotive

I returned to the hotel by taxi and headed straight to Captain’s Cabin Pub for a very welcome ice-cold pint of “Black Friar’s Lager”, after which I stayed for a delicious dinner of traditional English fish and chips! Later that

evening, I had another lager while I caught up on my travel notes as a string quartet played beautiful classical Indian music – a very relaxing evening!

The next morning, after a delicious breakfast in the hotel, N.K. picked me up and drove me to the airport for my departure flight to New York and on to Los Angeles. I thanked N.K. for his overwhelming hospitality on my first visit to India. (Later, I would return to India several times, always on business, but also taking the opportunity to see some of the incredible wonders of the country!) The return flight on Air India to New York was again very nice in business class, especially the delicious Indian food served aboard the flight. Then a very pleasant Delta Airlines flight from New York to Los Angeles and a limo ride took me home with a wealth of memories and photos from my first visit to India – but not my last!



"India Gate" – New Delhi