

Travellady Magazine™

An Adventurous Journey to the Taj Mahal

Reflecting on the women of old and new India

By Larry Bridwell

This is about how an evening drive to the Taj Mahal - a monument to a 17th-century Mughal Empress -- turned into a foggy overnight/early morning adventure and introduced me to the spiritual tranquility of India. It is also about a visit to an extraordinary new college that is changing the lives of some traditional Indian women.

My hectic, tightly scheduled two-day visit to Northern India had been arranged by Dr. Surenda Kaushik of Pace University in New York. He had founded the Helena Kaushik Women's College - named after his wife -- to provide tuition-free education to poor rural women in Malsisar, the village of his childhood. Dr. Kaushik and his brothers had been encouraged to pursue higher education, but consistent with Indian tradition, his sister had married at fourteen. To change this family dynamic, he established the college in 1999.

I arrived at the Delhi Airport and was driven four hours through the beautiful hillsides, semi-arid deserts and poor villages of rural Rajasthan. We stopped at a religious rest-house with a stunning vista and saw books about a prominent spiritual guru for sale.

Then, we entered the New India of Helena Kaushik Women's College. The young women had bright faces that reflected their joy at getting an education that was far superior to that of their mothers. But their dancing at the festivities showed respect for traditional

Indian culture and also incorporated modern Western music.



The impact of the college is revolutionary. Before it was established, girls in the local all-female high school could get only a 10th-grade education. But families forced the school to expand by two years so that their daughters would be eligible to enroll in the tuition-free college. The



young women can now pursue life-changing opportunities with college degrees in science, math and other technical subjects. In the process, they can help create a modern India in which women can combine traditional and professional lives.

It was my first trip to India, and I wanted to see the Taj Mahal. The routine trip that was planned turned out to be quite an adventure. Driving along the two- and four-lane National Highway, we soon reached the beautiful Pink City of Jaipur, which is encircled by walled pink towers. My driver spoke no English, but I managed to determine that a three-hour drive to Agra would get me to the Sheraton Hotel and a good night's sleep before I visited the Taj the next morning.



Night came -- and so did the rains! And in the wet darkness, a tire blew! Fortunately, I always pack a flashlight when I travel, and I held it while my driver changed the tire.

After navigating slowly through vicious torrents, we found ourselves in the midst of the densest fog I have ever seen. Through sign language, I urged the driver to stop. He took a break at a roadside stand which was also the home of its owner who explained the personal significance of the shrine he had built there. The altar featured Hindu gods who are important to his ancestors.



Then we were on the road again, but the weather forced us to stop at a gas station. The driver pushed down the back of my seat and drew a blanket over me. I wondered if we would get to the Taj by morning; I had an early afternoon flight from Delhi to Mumbai. I also considered that the few hundred dollars I had -- several months income for many people - made me a juicy criminal target. But my experience with the people of India and the visit to the shrine had reassured me that most Indians want to live a morally correct life. I thought, in this deeply spiritual nation, no harm will come to me.

After a few hours sleep, I woke up the driver and we took off through a lighter fog, past rolling hills with misty, lush scenery. At seven a.m., we arrived at the Sheraton Hotel in Agra, and I was back in the New India. The hotel's bedroom was visually stunning. I had played it safe during the car trip by eating only the packaged snacks and drinking the bottled water I had brought with me. The Sheraton offered a fabulous Asian and Western morning buffet. Never did breakfast thrill me so much!

Finally, the Taj! I was glad I was there early, at 9 a.m., so I could appreciate the setting without distractions. There were only 20 people there that quiet morning, but I learned that multitudes descend from afternoon tour buses.



The Taj Mahal, deservedly one of the seven wonders of the world, was built by the Mughal Emperor to honor the memory of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal. The beautiful gardens and buildings create a powerful testimony to romantic love.

A wife four hundred years ago inspired the Taj Mahal; in the 21st century, the Helena Kaushik College – named after another wife -- is inspiring and preparing young women for the new India. Ancient culture and modern changes make visiting India an adventure in old and new spiritual enchantment.

Helena Kaushik Women's College, Malsisar, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan, India 331 028, 150 miles west of Delhi and 120 miles from Jaipur. Telephone: 91(0)1595, 7576818, 7576593 or 7576561. <http://www.helenakaushik.org>. For more information and to visit the college, contact Dr. Surendra K. Kaushik, 221 Macy Road, Briarcliff Manor, NY 10510-1017. (914) 762-6168, Cell phone: (914) 525-3129, Fax: (914) 762-8038, skaushik@pace.edu.

Taj Mahal: Sat-Thurs; museum Tues-Thurs. 91(0)562 330496. Guides are available through local hotels or outside the front entrance.

Sheraton Hotel: Taj Ganj Agra, Uttar Pradesh 282001 India. 91(0)562 233-1701 or 91(0)562 361701. Fax 91(0)562 233-1730 or 91(0)562 361730. <http://www.Sheraton.com>. From \$100.

Also in Agra: **Agra Fort**, built by Mughal emperors beginning in 1565. Within its massive walls are palaces, courts, mosques, baths, gardens and pavilions. A sound and light show at 7:30 p.m. daily.

Government of India Tourist Office, 191, The Mall, Agra 282001, 91(0)562 363377, 91(0)562 363959. <http://www.tourindia.com/>

Guidebook: **Eyewitness Travel Guides' "India"** has color maps and photos and just the right amount of explanations, historical and cultural background, and information about hotels, restaurants and shopping. <http://www.dk.com>.

Images by Helena Kaushik Women's College and India Tourist Office.