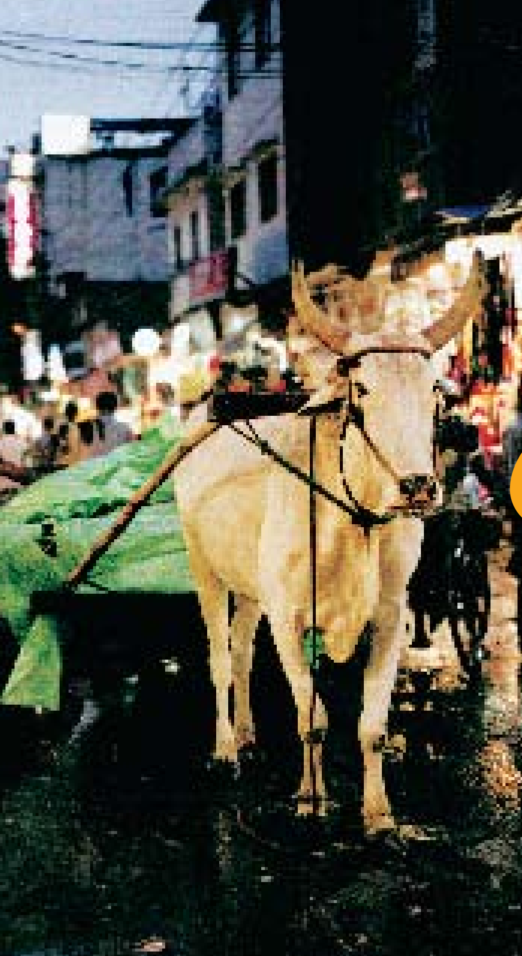
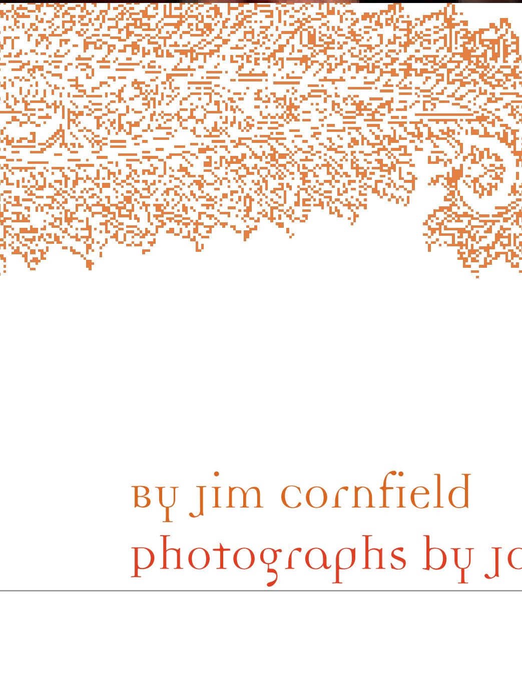
This page, clockwise from top left: Many of Old Delhi's walls are adorned with torn posters; a market in Old Delhi; a close-up of Qutb Minar, the tallest tower in India; opposite page, top: a sacred cow wanders through a crowded street; bottom: henna tattooing

full of wonder

another writer's passage to india takes him on a journey through centuries of history





"Great sheets of still water, inlaid marble colonnades, and carved marble couches at the edge, thick trees and lime bushes and acres of night-blooming flowers that scented the whole air."

— Rudyard Kipling, from a letter describing a Mughul garden in western India

The seeds of my personal pilgrimage to India were planted eons ago, in the back of a grade-school classroom where I mused over some cutout photos tacked to a bulletin board: "The Seven Wonders of Our World."

They were the usual fare — pyramids, the Great Wall, the Eiffel Tower. I was about 9 years old, and I remember puzzling over what committee of grown-ups got to confer "wonder of the world" status. And why had they omitted Disneyland from the list, or for that matter, the Green Bay Packers?

The Taj

One particular image on the board tantalized me more than the others, partly for its almost supernatural symmetry, but also, I think, because it always looked strangely edible. It was the Taj Mahal, and I wasn't the first fourth grader to imagine the masterpiece as a huge, intricately frosted birthday cake.

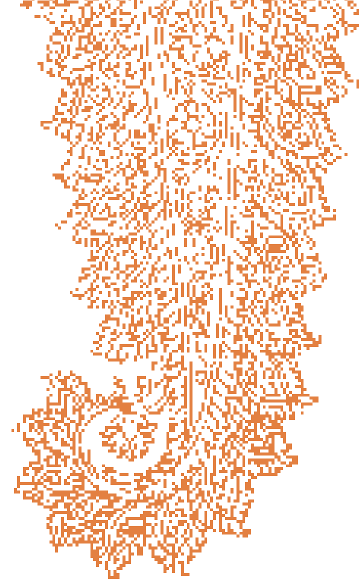
Almost 50 years later, I'm at last rolling toward an encounter with this giant confection, south along the Surajkund Road from Delhi, roughly parallel to both the Ganges River and the Grand Trunk Road — the fabled commercial highway that Kipling called "the river of life." My car is a hired Tata Motors sedan and my driver, also hired, is Bhupender ("Bhupi" to his friends), a cheery young Delhi native in a crisp, white safari suit. We're traveling in the midst of the notorious monsoon season, when the 100-degree-plus swelter of April, May, and June is supposedly relieved by wind-driven downpours from the Indian Ocean. Monsoons, mostly confined to the summer months, are crucial to the economy of this huge agrarian country, and regular deluges hammer our windshield like drumsticks, but the temperature never seems to drop.

In the sodden heat outside my car window, despite the recurrent squalls, steady streams of travelers move slowly and purposefully in both directions. Many of them are pedestrians — laborers, families, peddlers, Hindu devotees bound for the Ganges, bearing *kavadis,* colorful flowered basket floats. Those who aren't on foot ride aboard an amazing diversity of vehicles — oxcarts, lopsided hay wains, tidy scooters, and motorcycles for the more affluent, rusty ancient bicycles for others, and everywhere the ubiquitous three-wheeled, gas-powered auto rickshaws.

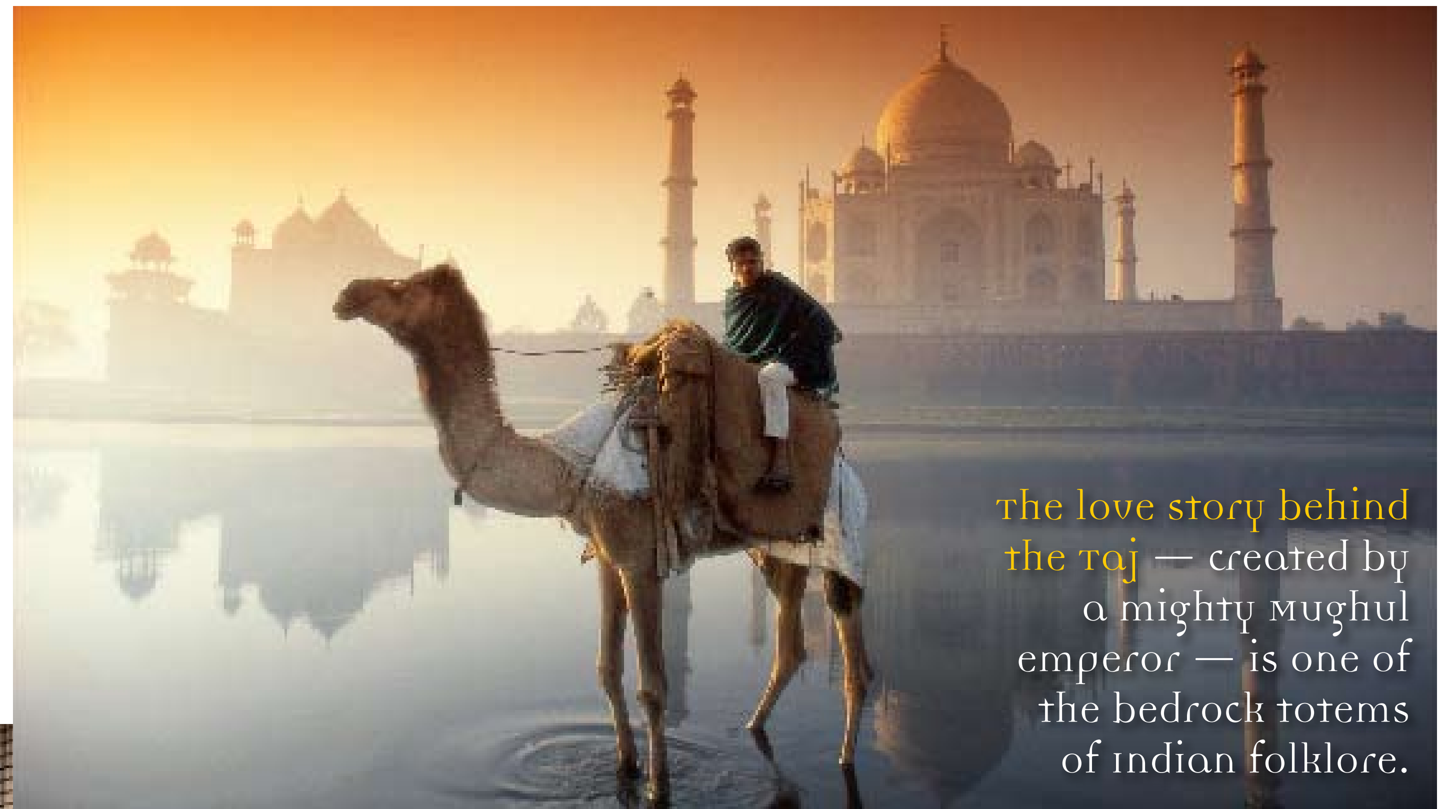
Between sparse, muddy little villages, stands of *chameli* trees line the highway. Monsoonal moisture will make these trees blossom at night with

by jim cornfield

photographs by james whitlow delano



This page, clockwise from top left: Spices for sale in the Gadodia market; Old Delhi; a driver stands next to his car near Rajpath India Gate, a memorial for soldiers lost in World War I; opposite page: the majestic Taj Mahal



The love story behind the Taj — created by a mighty Mughul emperor — is one of the bedrock totems of Indian folklore.

BLAINE HARRINGTON (TAJ MAHAL)

yellow flowers. For now, on a gray, sultry day, the color along this road is mostly in the bright saris and the *ghughats* of passing women, and an occasional gaudy auto rickshaw that's been colorfully repainted.

This particular stretch of highway is a leg of what India tourism specialists call the Golden Triangle. Its gateway city is Delhi in the north, with Agra to the south and Jaipur — the storybook Rajasthani "pink city" — in the west forming the other corners. These are easily reached by train or tour bus, but I've opted for car travel to maintain a little flexibility in my itinerary.

Make no mistake — auto travel in India is an adventure. Fortunately, my driver is an artist at the nerve-racking technique of straddling center lanes to avoid wayward cattle on either side of the road. The rule is, you do not endanger these creatures. They have royal status in India and graze along shoulders and highway medians — and practically anywhere else — with complete impunity. Bhupi has also mastered the roller-coaster style of heel-and-toe acceleration and the ability to weave through corkscrew road congestion in the small towns, his horn blaring incessantly to warn off sluggish vehicles.

After the Tata's tireless horn carves us a path through the crowded, wet streets of Agra, Bhupi introduces me to his colleague, Liman Kuma Dutta, who will be my guide for an encounter with the enticing relic of my schooldays, the Taj Mahal. Courtly, articulate, and knowledgeable, Liman is everyone's image of an aristocratic Brahmin. Dressed in non-native plaid and khaki, he slips into his official "Incredible India" tour guide vest and ushers me into the parklike grounds that insulate India's most famous building from the tourist hurly-burly of Agra. Tickets for visiting foreigners are 500 rupees (about $12.50), but the majority of visitors here are native Indians. The love story behind the Taj is one of the bedrock totems of Indian folklore. It was created in the 17th century by the mighty Mughul emperor Shah Jahan as a sublime memorial to Mumtaz Mahal, the young bride he outlived.

In close-up, the Taj Mahal is, as advertised, straight out of *Tales of the Arabian Nights*: the delicate quartet of minarets, the precise symmetry, scalloped arches covered in lavish filigreed screens, elegant *pietra dura* inlays of semiprecious stones, and everywhere you look, perfectly chiseled floral patterns over expanses of white, translucent marble — supposedly chosen to suggest the fair-complexioned beauty of the queen entombed two floors beneath the bulbous dome. Other than the minor blemishes that come naturally to a 352-year-old architectural dowager, there's only one obvious flaw. Inside the sultry, dimly lit main chamber, Liman points out a lone bit of graffiti scratched into a panel of beveled glass near the entrance: "Armstrong 1856." Although nobody knows who Armstrong was, his dubious immortality is assured.

To the city of Agra — where manufacturing is restricted and car traffic around the mausoleum is banned to protect it from air pollutants — the Taj Mahal is, itself, the main industry. To most Indians, of course, it is a great deal

more, a nostalgic touchstone for the fairy-tale character of their shared past. "They come here," says Liman, "to see what we once were."

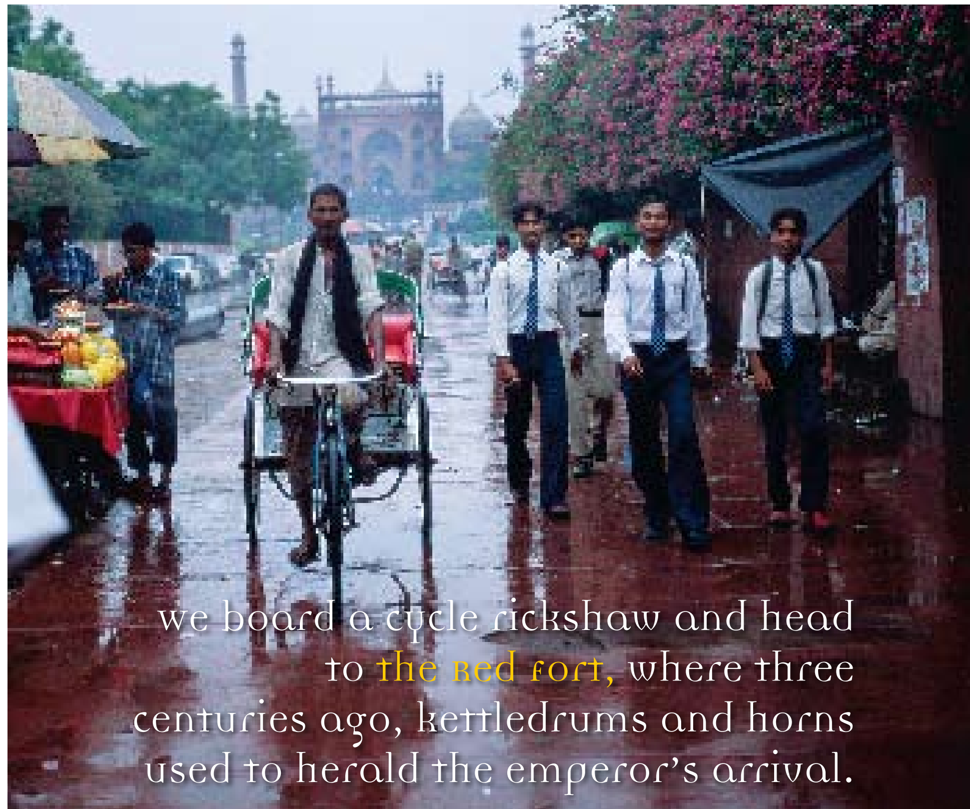
The Raj

Beyond my boyhood fantasies of the Taj Mahal, India enters my past on another bandwidth. My late father, who was British by birth and immigrated to the U.S. as a kid, remained an ardent Anglophile all his life. His fascination with the epoch of British rule in India, known as the Raj, was handed down to me as an inherited passion for the works of Rudyard Kipling, especially the enduring novel *Kim* and the earthy, cockney ditties of hard-bitten soldiering collected in *Barrack-Room Ballads.*

Almost every film epic about India relies on a stock character, the bungling British officer who never seems to think very highly of the natives. Unfortunately, those depictions are chillingly close to historical accuracy. The imperial hauteur of many British colonists in India for the first 200 years of their stewardship turned out to be a harbinger of what historian Christopher Hibbert called "the troubles soon to come."

Hibbert was referring to the armed conflict known to the British as the Mutiny of 1857 and to modern Indians as the First National Uprising. Historically, it marked an early hint that the sun would one day set on the far-flung British Empire. The events of the Uprising also extinguished the dying embers of another mighty empire — the once vast domain of India's Mughul emperors. They were the descendants of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, fierce warriors as well as inspired architects, and as powerful in their day as the Caesars. The Mughuls' ultimate demise was a tragic one, and I'm now headed back to Delhi, to the very spot where that event occurred.

At Frontier, a restaurant in the Ashok Hotel, in Delhi's exclusive Chanakyapuri embassy district, Bhupi and I meet up with Rajesh Ranjan and share some exotic variations of dal (dark lentils) and roti (bread). Rajesh will be our guide in Delhi.



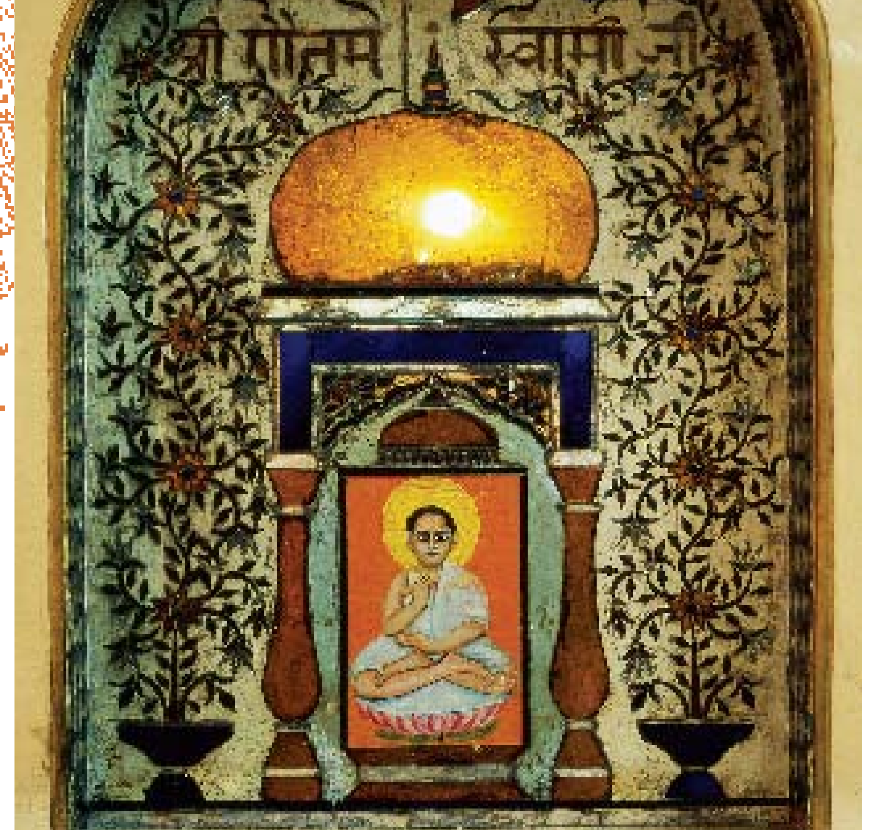
We board a cycle rickshaw and head to the Red Fort, where three centuries ago, kettledrums and horns used to herald the emperor's arrival.

A few kilometers west of Chanakyapuri, close to the Yamuna River, we stop at Humayun's Tomb, a domed Muslim-style mausoleum of red sandstone and white marble surrounded by formal lawns and rows of neem, banyan, and tamarind trees. Humayun was the second Mughul emperor, and it's impossible to view this 16th-century building, his final resting place, without recognizing the germ of the design for the Taj Mahal, built almost a century later.

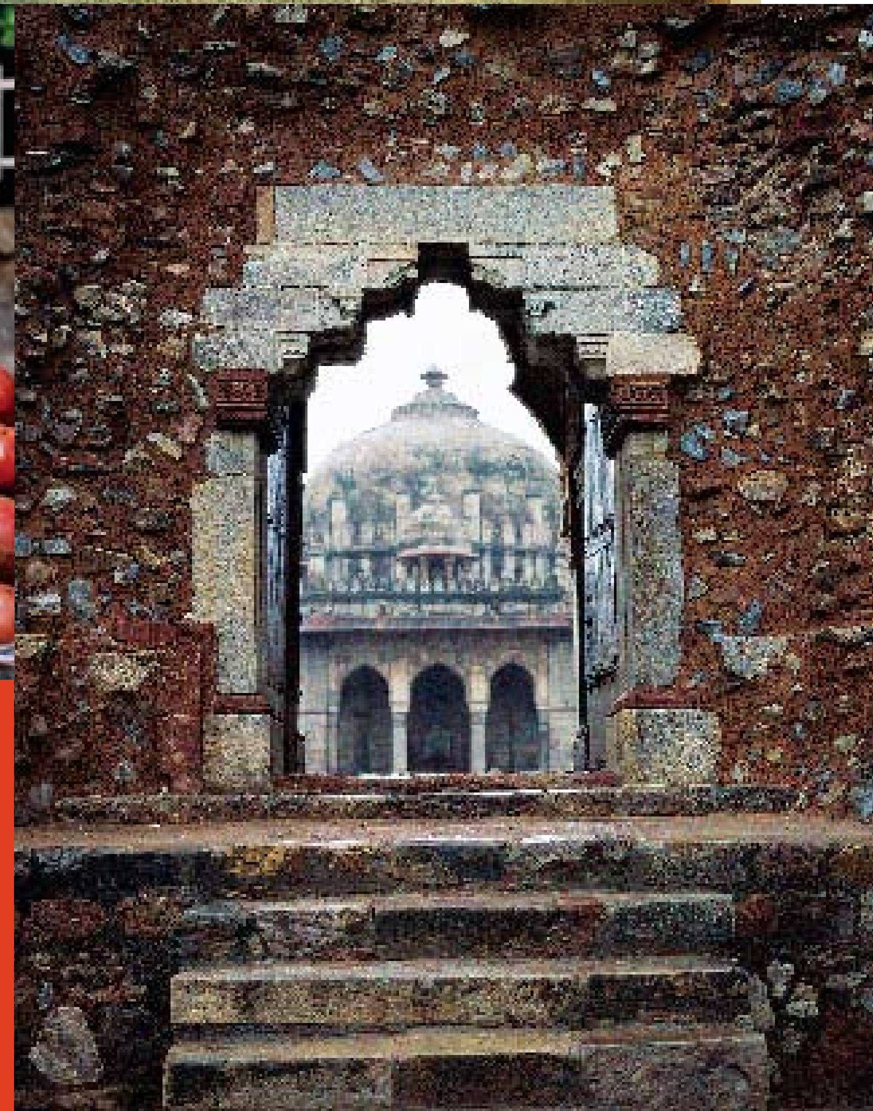
For me, the most important site in this entire ancient complex is the burial chamber of Humayun's grandchildren, just off the main area that houses the Emperor's tomb. In the center of the high, dark vault, scarred by age-old graffiti, and strangely cool in today's monsoonal heat, are two marble cenotaphs, one for a male child and a lower one for a female. High, arched windows admit fresh air from the river, past ornately carved sandstone screens.

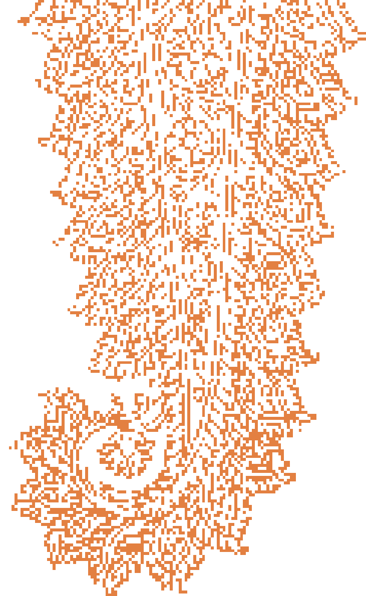
If world history were a connect-the-dots game, Humayun's Tomb — perhaps this very chamber — could be one of the dots. It is said that in September 1857, in the wake of the abortive mutiny, the 82-year-old reigning king of Delhi, Bahadur Shah, a direct descendant of Akbar the Great and the last Mughul ruler of India, retreated to the chamber while terms of his surrender to Lt. William Hodson, a British officer, were negotiated. This was the finale of one empire — the Mughuls — and, though they didn't know it yet, it was the beginning of the end for the British in India.

The conflict of 1857 began as a rebellion in the ranks of native infantrymen — sepoys — commanded by officers of an army in the pay of the British East India Company. This was a commercial trading firm that had represented English interests on the subcontinent since the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Eventually, this group of tradesmen came to rule India, which some historians have described as Britain's "golden bird" during this period. Merchants plundered the country's tea, coal, cotton,



This page, clockwise from top right: Svetambara Temple, built in 1668; Humayun's Tomb inspired the Taj Mahal; a fruit seller in front of Kashmiri Gate; opposite page: a rickshaw driver pedals away from the Red Fort.





This page, clockwise from top left: Fabrics on sale in a bazaar near the Red Fort; Jantar Mantar observatory, built in 1710; the imposing Red Fort; opposite page: an afternoon of boating at Rajpath.

and precious gems, shipping them off to the docks of London and the mills and factories of Manchester.

The arrogance that came with this tremendous economic power eventually led to trouble. It began with rumors circulated among sepoys that the new rifles they had been issued by "John Company" — as the British East India Company was known among locals — required the soldiers to bite the tops off powder cartridges greased with beef and pork tallow. The sepoys viewed this as a flagrant disregard for Muslim and Hindu dietary laws, and as word spread, fires of rebellion broke out in military cantonments throughout the country. The small war that resulted left permanent marks on India, the first being the end of John Company's administration over the country. The British crown took over operations in 1858.

From Humayun's tomb, we head north toward the Kashmiri Gate. This site, now a dusty ruin near the railway station, was part of the fortification that once surrounded the walled city of Old Delhi — India's capital, on and off, for centuries. The gate was the scene of great violence both at the beginning of the rebellion, and later, when the British stormed in to retake Delhi. Armed with a couple of ancient photographs taken shortly after the mutiny, I tramp over neglected rubble in back of some fruit sellers' carts. Artillery pockmarks that show in my antique photos are still visible in the sandstone arches. A lone, badly weathered stone memorial remains, placed there in 1876 by Royal Engineers [continued on page 110]

TICKET TO RIDE

About 120 miles north of Delhi is the town of Haridwar, where the Ganges River, sacred to Hindus, emerges from the Himalayas and begins its southward rush. In 1968, the Beatles came to the village of Rishikesh, just north of Haridwar. Their purpose was to commune with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and experience a bit of spiritual enlightenment, and probably to escape for a time from the glare and commotion of international stardom.

As I attempt to follow in their footsteps, it's easy to see what drew the Beatles to this part of India. Riding the steep road up to the string of yoga ashrams for which Rishikesh is known, you can view the headwaters of the Ganges between towering Himalayan foothills. There are clouds at the top, and woodfire smoke rises against the green of Rajaji National Park, a wildlife preserve that surrounds the village.

BETTMANN/CORBIS (BEATLES)

Accounts of the group's sojourn here are sparse. They reportedly used their "down time" between meditation sessions to write most of the songs that eventually made up their eponymous double LP that became known as the "White Album." One cut, "Dear Prudence" came about one evening when John Lennon and Paul McCartney tried to coax Mia Farrow's sister, Prudence, from her room.

I remember Lennon's pronouncement about his Indian experience: "If the Beatles or the '60s had a message, it was learn to swim. Period. And once you learn to swim, swim. You make your own dream."

As I watch the powerful muddy water of the river race by, I can't help but reflect on Lennon's words. But the current is treacherous. I grab the safety chain set up for pilgrims and take my first step into the icy Mother Ganges. *– J.C.*

[continued from page 75] (a division of the British army). It describes a hair-raising raid here during the siege of September 1857. The overall disrepair suggests that, in modern India, the Kashmiri Gate isn't a high-priority monument.

The true legacy of the 1857 mutiny is in the events that followed, which would change India and Britain forever. Following the removal of John Company, England attempted to govern with a more benevolent hand. Still, Queen Victoria added Empress of India to her list of titles, and the country continued to be viewed as her "jewel in the crown." But the wheel of independence had already started its slow roll forward. Rajesh wants to give me a little perspective on that movement, so we board a cycle rickshaw captained by a powerful little man known as Mr. Danny and head to Lal Qila, the Red Fort, the massive structure where three centuries ago, kettledrums and horns used to herald the emperor's arrival.

Lal Qila, a contemporary of the Taj Mahal, is another product of Shah Jahan's passion for architecture, rich in uniquely Mughul design conceits — like the somber arch over the Lahore Gate, flanked by twin minarets and topped by a row of seven small marble domes that gleam like white teeth from the broad maidan in front. Inside the fort, I stroll through the Chatta Chowk — a covered bazaar crowded with native tourists and lined with the stalls of haggling weavers and goldsmiths, much as it was during the reign of Aurangzeb, the Mughul emperor who established this very arcade for the pleasure of his four wives and 750 (!) concubines. Farther inside the grounds, the Diwan-i-Khas (Hall of Private Audiences) houses the marble pedestal where the famed Peacock Throne once sat. In this same hall, in 1858, the British tried and condemned King Bahadur Shah for his complicity in the Uprising. This trial stands as the Red Fort's crowning irony, since, 88 years afterward, from the top of this same citadel, India at long last raised its tricolor flag, declaring independence from Great Britain.

By way of reminding me of the deep cultural gulf that always lurked between the two countries, Rajesh instructs Mr. Danny to wheel us from the fort into the splashy chaos of the Chandni Chowk, the congested commercial area in the center of Old Delhi. Under an overhead tangle of vintage electrical wiring and endless multilingual signs, a series of bright cycle rickshaws makes its way among whining motor scooters and the crush of pedestrians. Shops and open stalls are pure sensory overload. My nostrils take in the tangling aromas of cardamom, cinnamon, jasmine, and motor oil. There are trays of lustrous gemstones and bracelets, flowing saris, woven carpets, [continued on page 112]

gleaming brass, carved sandalwood, languid drapes of fabric in stunning orange and blue and lavender, and huge open sacks of fruit, teas, and spices. In short, the lucre of fabled ancient civilizations and trade routes still arrayed in a centuries-old Asian bazaar at the center of a modern city.

In stark contrast to Chandni Chowk is the huge, British-built circular shopping district known as Connaught Place — the commercial hub of India's capital, New Delhi. Built in 1931, it's the city's current home of modern commerce — shops, restaurants, hotels, and theaters. With its staid circle of columned walkways and orderly radial roads, westernized "CP" is one of Britain's most important legacies in India. But there's another that Rajesh wants me to see. Back in the car, we wheel around Connaught Place and head south toward Rajpath, the "Royal Road," the broad, tree-lined central corridor of New Delhi, designed and laid out by the celebrated architect Sir Edwin Lutyens.

At the head of Rajpath, the copper dome of the presidential palace shimmers against a veil of distant monsoonal moisture. The president's home is larger than the Palace of Versailles and contains 340 rooms. The British chose the site in 1911 to be the residence of the viceroy. But during the long period of New Delhi's construction, stirrings of Indian independence were taking on serious dimensions — in part, under the leadership of the beatific Mahatma Gandhi, the great champion of nonviolent civil disobedience. Things were about to change in India.

It's midday when we park close to the palace under the scrutiny of two armed soldiers, who don't seem fazed when I walk to the entrance for a closer look. Ornamental brass cannons sit beside the high wrought iron gates, and marble elephants top each of the stone fence posts that surround the property. Periodically, a three-man detachment of white-turbaned Sikh guardsmen marches its ceremonial tour across the front lawn.

I look back east toward India Gate, the imposing war memorial arch in the distance. On either side of Rajpath are domed Palladian public buildings on a majestic scale — the Finance Ministry, Parliament House, and the Ministry of Defense, all behind stately pillars that would be at home on the boulevard of any European capital. The people who commissioned these structures were planning to stay awhile.

They were mistaken.

Frequent contributor Jim Cornfield wrote about Roatán in our August issue.

Getting There: Continental is pleased to offer daily nonstop service to Delhi from its hub in New York/Newark. Continental serves more destinations than any other airline in the world.