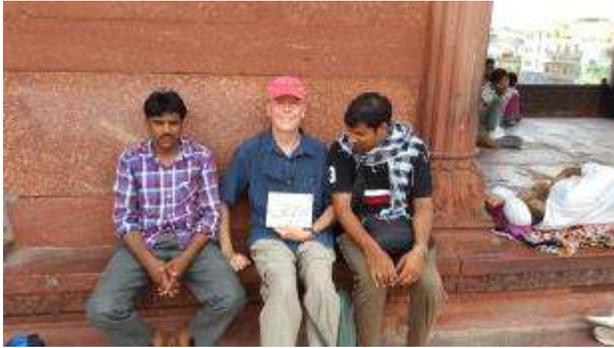


There are more than a dozen colours in India

Reflections on a Spice Tour of India – August 2015

Stephen Brigham



We recently went to India on a Yale Educational Tour led by Professor Paul Freedman who specializes in (among other things) the history of cuisine. While the focus was spice, the tour was wide-ranging introduction to India. It started in Chennai where the East India Company originated and ruled the beginnings of the British Empire, then to the hill station of Munnar in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala with all of its

tea plantations, then down to Thekkady home of India's largest wildlife sanctuary (the Periyar National Park), then further down toward the Malabar Coast to a houseboat tour of the amazing Kerala backwaters. After two days of luxurious cruising in the waterways, we then completed our Southern India tour in the port city of Kochi where most of our tour group departed. Our family continued our tour with a flight north to India's golden triangle to experience the three destinations of this tourist route: India's capital city Delhi; Agra the home of the Taj Mahal and the historically significant Red Fort; and finally to Jaipur the capital and largest city of the Indian state of Rajasthan, known as the "Pink City" with its orderly networks of gridded streets laid out by the Bengali Brahmin architect Vidyadhar Bhattacharya in 1727. Between our tours of India's many palaces and monuments we were treated to amazing feasts of India's regional cuisines, the spices that lured so many colonial powers to India, evening lectures from Professor Freedman, and the expertise and hospitality of our guides Radhika Gopal in the south and Rashid Latif in the north.

Trying to capture some of this adventure in quick sketches and watercolours proved especially challenging, but as stated in the title, I knew that my modest travel watercolour kit probably needed a few more colours than the dozen trays I normally use. So my first step to prepare for the trip was to upgrade my travel watercolour kit to a 24 colours kit - the "Sakura 24-Piece Koi Field Sketch Set". For this trip I also brought a couple Sakura waterbrushes (a large wedge brush and a medium brush) so that I wouldn't have to fuss with a water container, and three Stillman & Birn Beta Series sketchbooks (5-1/2" x 8" 270 gsm white Cold Press).

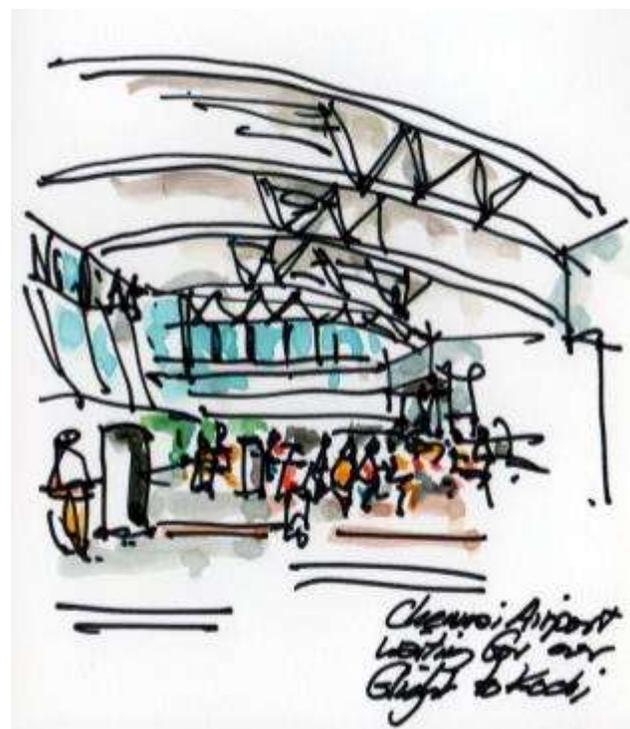
Southern India

Our first tour in Chennai proved a formidable challenge for sketching. Radhika took us to the exuberant Kapaleeshwarar Temple of Shiva with its innumerable statues on a pyramid shaped tower of bulls, elephants, peacocks, goat, parrots, flowers, and gods and goddesses. The only way to quickly capture some of its spirit was an impressionist splash of colour to imply the overall shape and texture with a bit of the crowd below. While doing a couple sketches inside the temple, a small girl and her family came over to watch me sketching. She seemed to like what I was doing and her mother encouraged her to practice some of her English with me. This became a regular pattern while sketching in crowded areas. I often stood out in the midst of tourists taking pictures with their smart phones, so it did not take long for a small audience to gather. Most of them took pictures of me and offered very kind words of encouragement while sketching. These moments became some of my very special memories of the trip.



Chennai was filled with numerous monuments and reminders of tumultuous colonial past, but before I could get more sketches done, we were off to the airport to experience the wondrous and spice-filled state of Kerala.

After arriving in Kochi, we embarked on a hair-raising bus-ride up to the hill station of Munnar, an area blanketed by tea plantations and carved by rivers with numerous spectacular waterfalls cascading into the valleys. The cool mountain air and numerous rain storms from the seasonal monsoons were a welcome relief. On our first morning we enjoyed a leisurely walk up into a tea plantation with a guide from the Kannan Devan Tea Museum. After yesterday's long bus ride, the walk was therapeutic with a few moments of gentle rain. Along our walk, we were reminded that this is elephant country with their huge



droppings on the path from their strolls through the plantation from the previous evening.



We also visited with some of the tea pickers who were wrapped in blue protective pads to keep the tea branches from causing injury. The ladies were very friendly and tolerated our numerous photographers and questions. We learned that they worked regardless of the weather, and today they had plastic bags over them to keep them relatively dry.

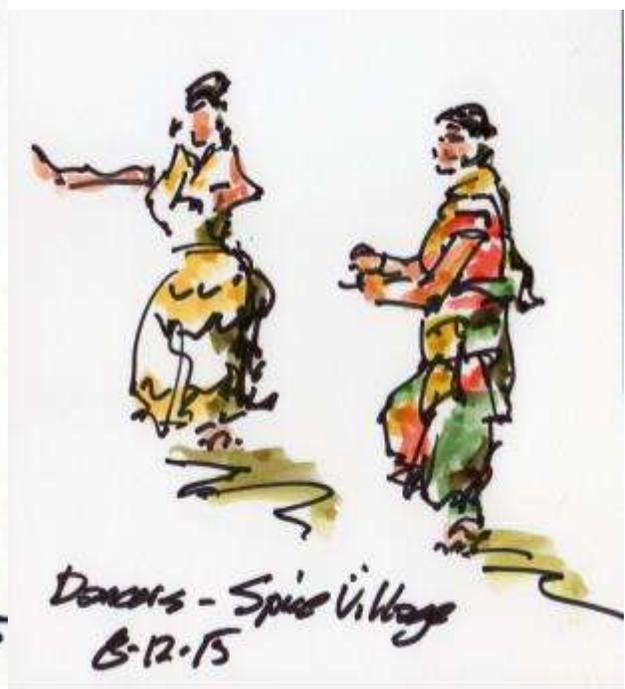
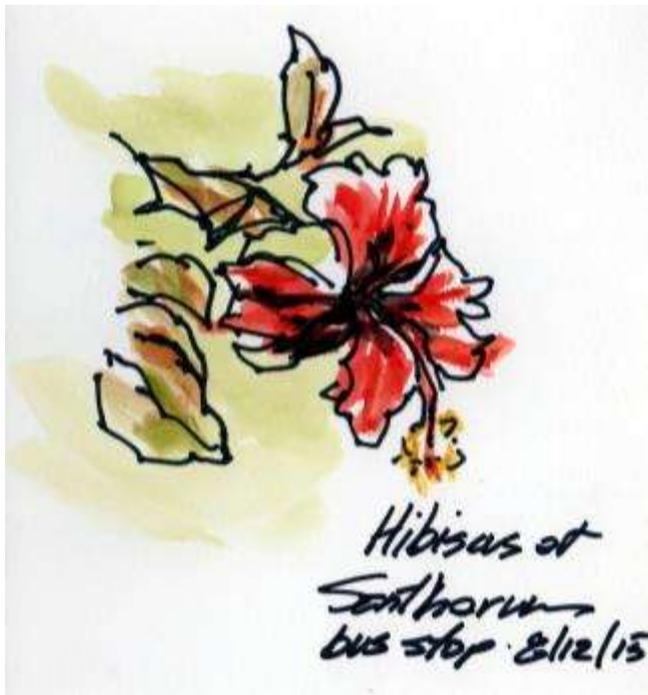
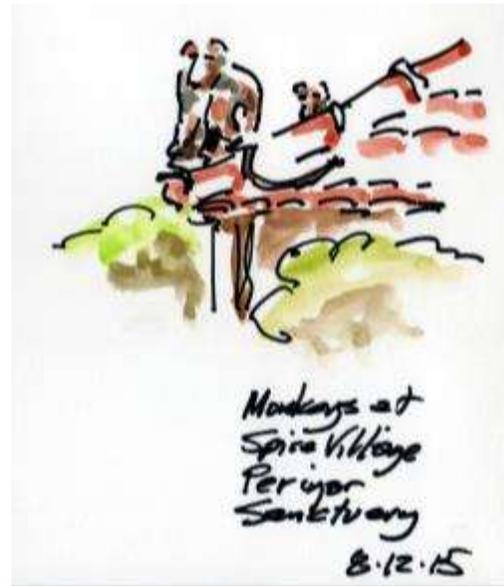
After our tour of the museum, our tour guide Radhika took us on a fascinating walk through Munnar's market showing us the local foods and spices. At one point we found ourselves in the midst of a communist party rally which we learned was quite common in Kerala given their 50 year history with communism. The rally participants welcomed us and took numerous pictures of our American group. Afterward, we wondered if these pictures would show up in a Homeland Security computer. Although it continued to rain, I managed to get a literal "wet-on-wet" sketch of our group in the market. The rain drops added an interesting texture to the sketch.



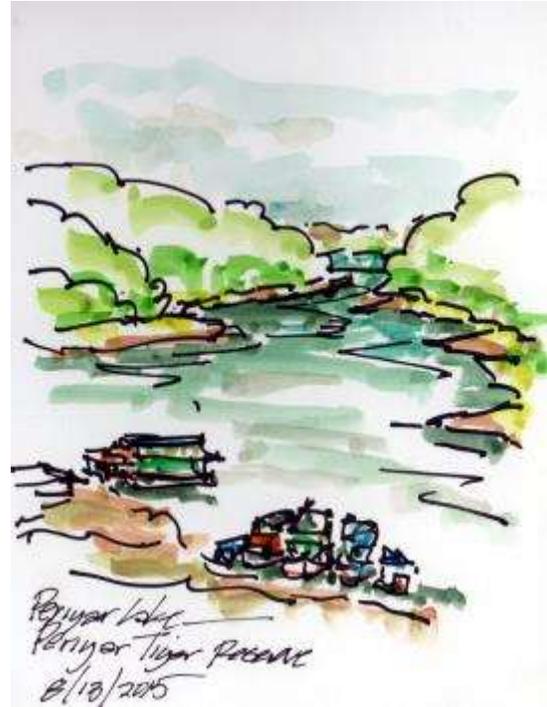
Our stay in the KTDC Tea County resort with its charming cottages that recalled its colonial past was very pleasant (and tasty!) but after two wonderful cool and rainy nights, we had to embark on another bus ride for our next spice adventure.



This ride took us through many tea, pepper, and cardamom plantations to our next destination, the Spice Village Resort in Thekkady. This amazing resort was described as a “tribal mountain village” built around a former British Park Ranger’s home and estate next to the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary. The resort had a pronounced ecological focus comprised of numerous individual buildings with thick walls and elephant grass thatched roofs. All of our dining was in an open air thatched roof structure with an incredible assortment of local foods and spices. Each evening there were cooking demonstrations and after dinner there were native dances in colourful traditional costumes. Each of us stayed in our own thatched roof hut where we could hear the sounds of a troop of monkeys who took up residence in the trees above.



This calm quiet “village” with its many ecological attributes (including solar panels that powered most of the village) was in stark contrast to the heavily populated areas we had been experiencing. Here nature was the primary focus. Our first tour of the area included the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary on a river boat where we saw elephants grazing on the river banks, water buffalo lounging in the grasses, and innumerable birds that our river guides were able to photograph using our own cameras. The area was also a center for cardamom, so after our Periyar river tour we visited a cardamom processing center on our way to a leisurely walk through a spice plantation.



Periyar Lake
Periyar Tiger Reserve
8/10/2015



Gift of Allah truck
Shipping cardamom
Periyar, Kerala
8/12/15

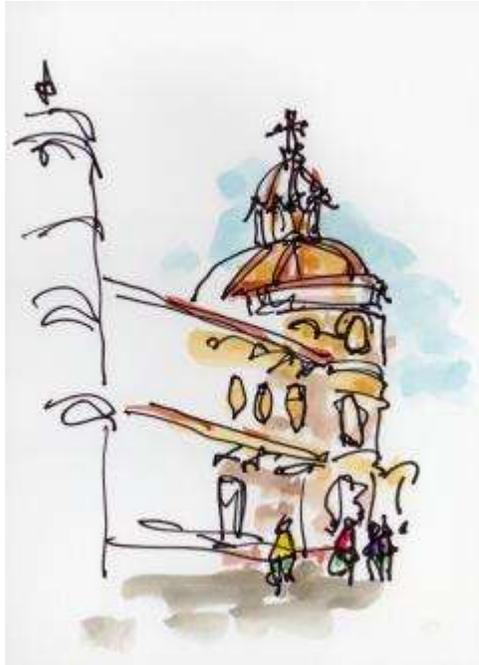


Sorting Cardamom



Spice plant hike

After two days of relaxing in the Spice Village we reluctantly took another bus ride knowing that we would be going down to lower elevations and a hotter climate. Along the way we made a few stops including one with this massive church sitting high on a hill with many steps up from the road. We also started to see many colourful trucks bringing goods to the cities from the highlands.



One of our more memorable stops was at the home of Anuja and Kurian at the Kalaketty Estate in the heart of a rubber plantation. We had one of our best meals and visits of the entire tour in their home which is described on their web site (<http://www.kalakettyestate.com/index.htm>) as "...a house set amidst old and huge Mahogany, Teak, Mangostene, Nutmeg and Clove trees and overlooks lush green paddy fields. Rubber is the main crop we grow on the estate, besides cocoa, tapioca, pepper, vanilla, rice, coconuts, bananas and pineapples." While the others finished their lunch, I managed to get this quick sketch of the main house which has been in the family for three generations.

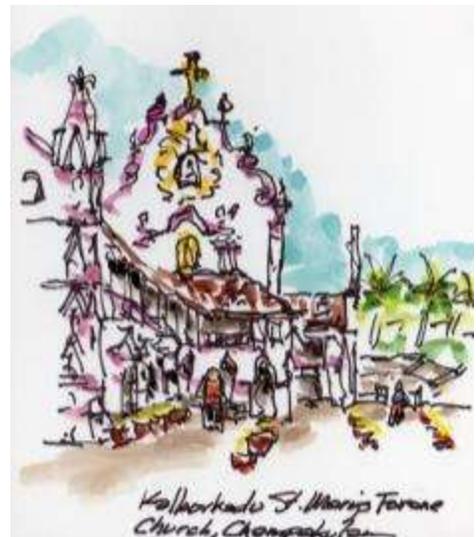


Again we reluctantly left this tranquil oasis and reboarded our bus for another wild ride to our next destination – a houseboat to tour the Kerala backwaters.



Our introduction to the houseboat was a bit ominous with a frantic disembarkment from the bus near a bridge and a walk down a dirt alley to the waterway. Our houseboat hosts loaded all our suitcases from the bus into a tuk tuk and then raced ahead to give us a gracious greeting to our home for the next two days, a glorious Kettuvallam Kerala houseboat that we learned are crafted in the style of the traditional rice/spice boats that shipped goods from the plantations to the seaport Kochi. We each had an air conditioned bedroom on the lower water level of the boat. On the upper main level was the main dining room that opened to a magnificent sun deck above the bow. We enjoyed many hours of watching life on the waterways punctuated by cooking demonstrations, fabulous meals and the occasional walks of the villages.

During one of these stops on the river I took a few minutes to sketch this Catholic church that was filled with parishioners.



After two blissful days on our houseboat, we drove to Kochi (Cochin), one of India's important sea ports known as the "Queen of the Arabian Sea". For us, it was an important center of Indian spice trade and the home of one of India's famous chefs, Nimmy Paul where we watched for an incredible cooking demonstration in an open air structure and then enjoyed the lunch from the demonstration.



Kochi was full of history and many historical sites from its Portuguese, Dutch, and British history.



One of the odd tourist attractions was the Chinese Fishing Nets with their elaborate counter-weighted mechanisms and flying nets. Although it was a great site for photos (and a couple sketches), it was not an active fishing site, so you have to tolerate the ubiquitous and aggressive vendors hawking tourist stuff.



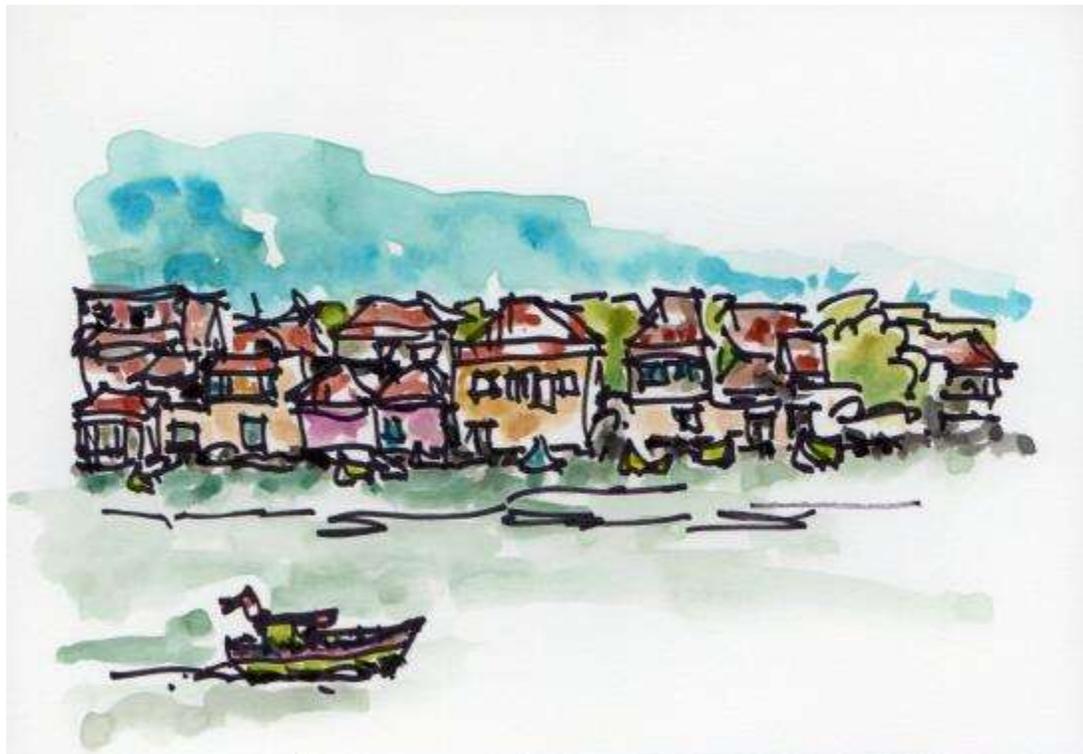
Kochi also has an interesting Jewish history and this sketch is from the area called "Jew Town".



One night we took in the Kathakali Dancers in a small theater downtown. The dancers (male) spent hours putting on make-up and the application of make-up was actually part of the demonstration.

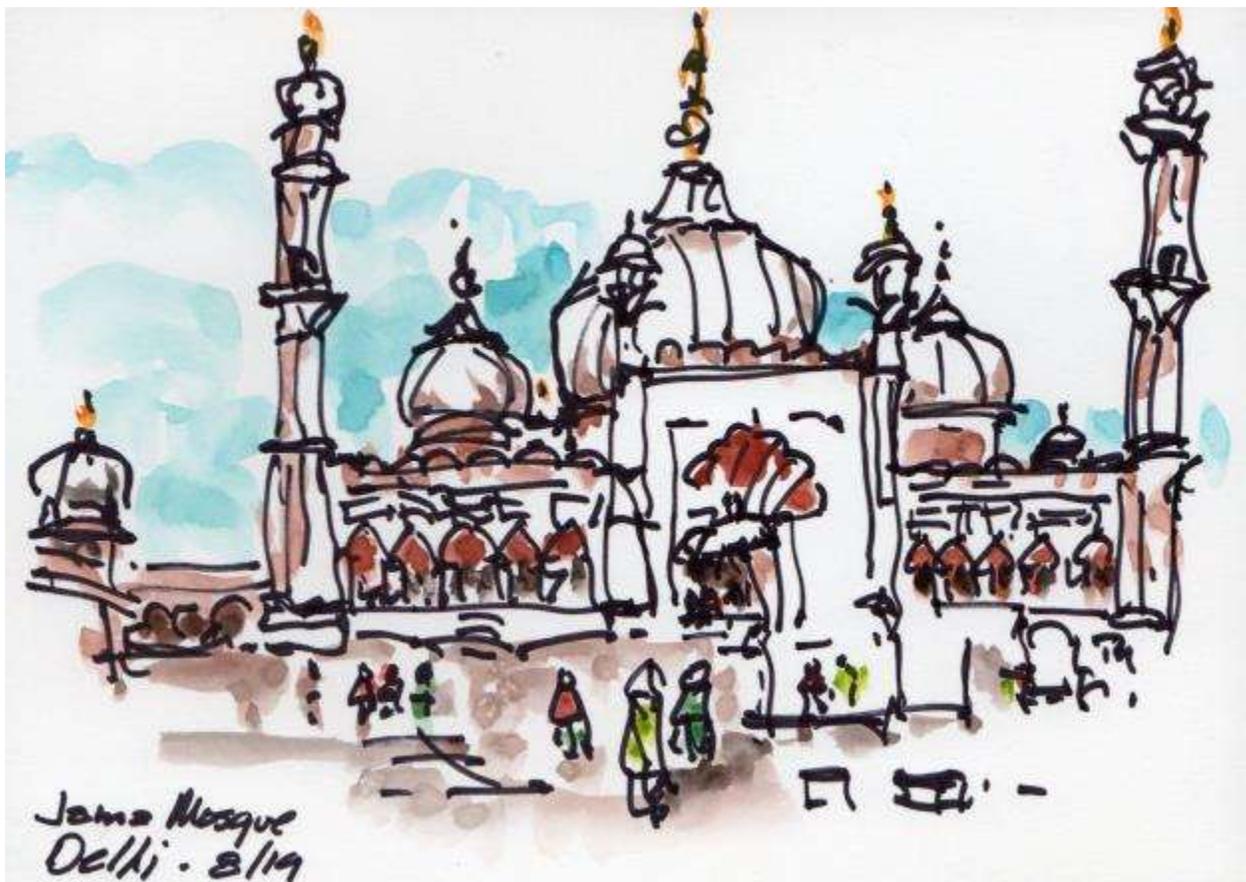


Sadly Kochi was also a point of departure for most of our group. Only one other tour member joined us to go north to experience the golden triangle of Delhi, Agra, and Jaipur. Before leaving our hotel in Kochi, I managed to grab one more sketch of the port looking toward one of the islands from our hotel room.



The Golden Triangle

Delhi was a big surprise to me. When we arrived at the Taj Palace Hotel and looked out our upper floor window, I was not prepared to see such a verdant city. There were trees everywhere and very few buildings popping above the canopy. I learned that the planning of New Delhi by the British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens and his colleagues borrowed heavily from other European and colonial cities with tree-lined boulevards, height restrictions, and a focus on the main governmental buildings and monuments. Post-independence Delhi has managed to keep and maintain much of this plan while the vertical growth of Delhi takes place outside the city's boundaries. Our tour of Delhi was fast and overwhelming including a bicycle rickshaw ride through the claustrophobic streets of Old Delhi. I managed to get one sketch in after our rickshaw ride at the Jama Mosque while sitting between several families who cheered me on as I attempted to complete the sketch while the others in the tour waited for me.

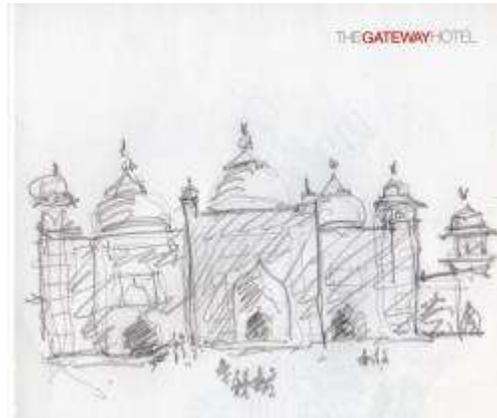


After a brief stop at 23 Jorbagh to see where Lindy and her sister Susan lived the early 1960s, we went to Qutab Minar, which was a fascinating complex with a mosque built with material obtained from demolishing Hindu temples.

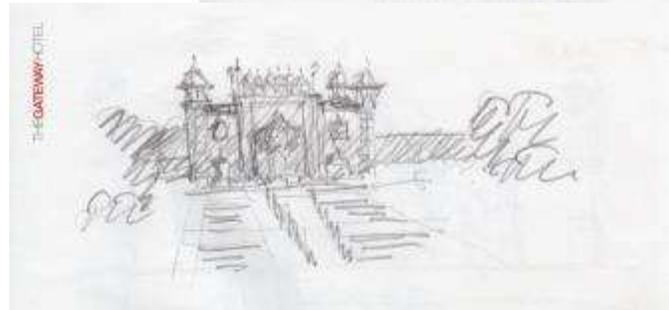


My one regret in Delhi was not having enough time to visit and sketch the colonial buildings of Lutyens – next trip!

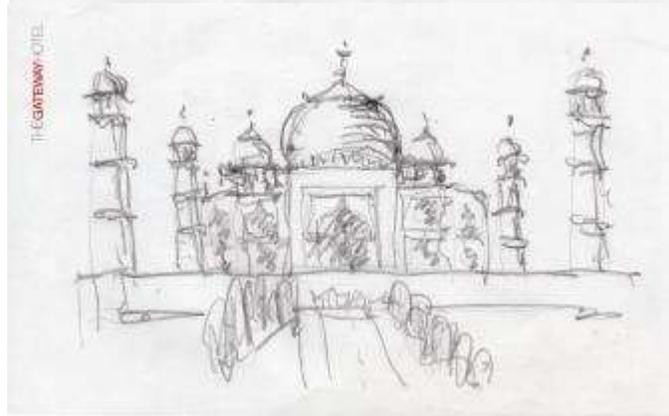
The second point of our Golden Triangle tour was Agra which was reached via a pleasant drive on a very modern concrete highway finished for the 2010 Commonwealth Games hosted in India. Agra of course is the home of one of the “wonders of the world”, the Taj Mahal – a white mausoleum embedded with an amazing assortment of semi-precious stones cut into the marble with amazing precision. Unfortunately, I learned on the day of our tour that the site has many restrictions including “...no books or colours...” which ruled out sketchbooks and watercolours! Our guide Rashid suggested that I bring in a few sheets of paper from the hotel and a pencil so that if these items were confiscated, I would not lose my entire watercolour kit. So when I presented these items to the security guards at the gate they were not concerned, so I took that as approval to complete a few pencil sketches. I had to work delicately since I



only had three small pieces of paper and the pencil had a blunt hard point so if I broke the point there was no way for me to sharpen it. After following the tour inside the mausoleum, I went off by myself to see what I could sketch. Sitting on the east side in the shade of the mausoleum, I managed to capture the Mihman Khana or assembly hall which mimics or balances the mosque which is on the west of the mausoleum. I then went to the front of the mausoleum to sketch the main south entry gate (darwaza-i rauza, 'gate of the mausoleum'). Both of these first two sketches were done comfortably in the shade and with a small audience of families taking pictures of me, which made me a little nervous since I still was not sure if I was doing anything illegal.



Gaining some courage and confidence I knew I had to get a traditional front-on sketch of the



mausoleum but the only place to do so was in the forecourt which was packed with people and in the full sun. I found a spot in the middle of the forecourt among many families taking pictures, but I tucked myself down on the hot sandstone against a wall. It was really hot and while sketching as fast as I could, an older gentleman with bright henna hair and traditional garb came up and gestured something about my hat. I couldn't figure out what he wanted but assumed that he thought I should remove my hat in this sacred spot. Finally someone said he wanted to borrow my hat for a picture so I gave him my hat and after his family took his picture with my hat on, I took one of him too. I was just finishing my sketch when two heavily armed guards approached me. They demanded my sketches which I gave them. While they passed them back and forth, I asked if I could take a picture of the sketches assuming they were going to confiscate them. That seemed to resonate with one of the guards who brusquely handed

the sketches back to me and repeatedly warned me that “this cannot be done here!” With no further argument from me I quickly retreated. While trying to let my adrenalin dissipate, I soon found shelter in the Taj museum in a secluded building west of the mausoleum where I was warmly greeted by a museum guard who asked to see my sketches. He said he was an artist and that he liked my sketches.

Later that afternoon we went to the roof of our hotel where we had a grand view of the Taj Mahal complex at sunset, so I managed to get a couple of watercolour sketches of the Taj Mahal after all.



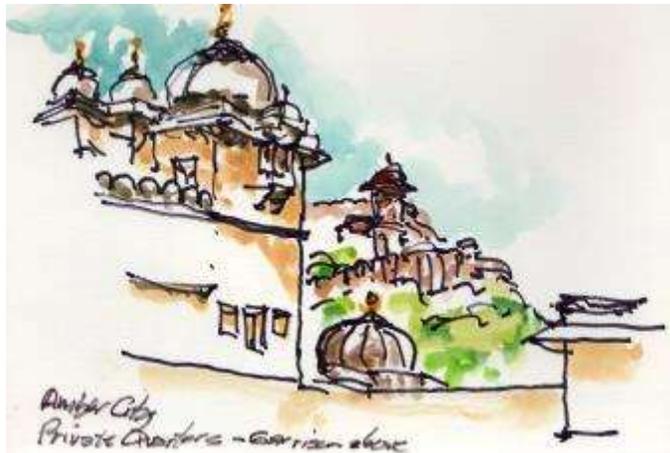
The next day we went to the Agra Red Fort, a huge Mughal complex up river from the Taj Mahal where Shah Jahan (the builder of the Taj Mahal) was imprisoned by his son. For the remainder of his life, Shah Jahan could only view his monument to his wife Mumtaz Mahal from the Red Fort.



Our third and final trip in the golden triangle was to Jaipur. Along the way we stopped at another incredible palace for lunch. These Mughal palaces seem to be everywhere and each one more remarkable than the last. While others toured the inside I took the opportunity to sketch the front façade from the forecourt.



Later when we arrived at our hotel in Jaipur, the Jai Mahal Palace, we were presented with the red carpet treatment, but we soon discovered the attention was for the India Pacific Island Cooperation Conference that was being held at our hotel where Prime Minister Modi was hosting representatives of the Pacific Island region on a summit regarding climate change. Jaipur was a fitting end to our tour in that it was an important city filled with monuments from many eras, shops showcasing India's many traditional arts and crafts, and food representing the region. Before departing back to Delhi on another wild bus ride, I managed to squeeze in a few more sketches of a few of Jaipur's attractions.





Our brief stay in Delhi reminded us that we were in the midst of India's monsoon season. During the night before our very early morning flight, Delhi was flooded by a huge storm that gave us some anxiety that we would not get to the airport on time. Fortunately, our driver knew an alternate route which required going the wrong way on a highway to bypass the flooded streets around the airport.

For a country as vast and historically rich as India, it was certainly difficult to write or draw enough to reflect the magnificence of the country in only a few weeks. I took many pictures from my phone for those instances when I could not get my sketchpad out quickly enough, but these quick travel sketches best reflect my joy to being introduced to just a few of the treasures of India.