

## SILK ROAD MAHABHARATA

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The waiters at the Hotel Atihi restaurant were getting used to our group show. It helped that we always left a dollar tip. They clamored to bring orange juice to our room (as mixer for the crude vodka). They rushed to refill our breakfast tea. A new morning brought a new strategy for conquering the Taj Mahal: the East Gate by 8. And I was sick as a dog.

All the usual suspects: nasal congestion, hot brow, phlegm, coughing, muscle aches, dizziness, fatigue, sneezing and runny nose.

None of which would deter a person intent on getting to the Taj Mahal, of course. What is it about that shrine that so stirs the admiration and imagination of the world? The very name Taj Mahal is synonymous with grandeur, enormity, opulence, and grace. It is the world's largest gem, at least in repute.

A lot of people think it's some kind of a palace or royal residence and some believe it's the largest building in antiquity or one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It might also be a giant temple or mosque honoring Indian gods. None of this stuff is true. In fact, the Taj Mahal is a tomb, a mausoleum, an elaborate grave – one rich couple's final resting place, but not mine, I hoped. Hack, cough, snuffle. I strapped on my Rick Steves security money belt, stuffed my pockets full of hotel toilet paper for sneeze tissue, jammed the pot stash into my right sock, and set off for the great monument.

The East Gate proved a stark contrast to its West counterpart, just as the concierge had promised. There were just as many aggressive vendors and beggars of course, but the line waiting to get in was only a few hundred tourists at the early hour, and no apparent Indians. We were charged the princely sum of 750 rupees (\$15) each and issued plastic shoe coverings since it's forbidden to enter the Taj wearing footwear. Lots of other things were prohibited too. The list included all tobacco products, "inappropriately revealing clothing" (whatever that meant), and the use of video cameras beyond a certain barrier. There was a checkroom service where the clerks inspected every item, no doubt vigilantly guarding against terrorist bombs while satisfying their curiosity. And as we inched forward toward the entrance gates segregated by sex, I saw for the first time that every visitor was getting a full head to toe pat-down search. Gulp.

I whispered to Hub about the pot stash in my sock. His Japanese complexion turned albino. "Why didn't you leave it in the hotel?" But that's precisely what I never do, as a matter of course. Money, passport, tickets, stash – stuff I won't risk losing – remain in my personal possession at all times. And there wasn't a single trash container or other way of disposing of the contraband in sight. We were under the intense scrutiny of armed guards on all sides. The only way out was the way in, through the full body search. I wondered what would happen. Would they simply confiscate the stuff? Arrest me and fling me into some vermin infested cell? Extract a huge fine for my release? Or somehow, magically, fail to find the bag?

After passing through a metal detector, I had to climb three steps up onto a wooden platform, rather like ascending the gallows, but the inspector was smiling and friendly. He detected my money belt, had me open it for viewing. He fondled my crotch and squeezed my balls. No airport security check was half as invasive. And he kept smiling and laughing, as did I. He found my Bic lighter and said “Cigarettes?” “No, no cigarettes.” He said I could go back and check the lighter but I shrugged and tossed it into the confiscation basket of forbidden items. Then he patted my legs down to the ankles on both sides – and completely missed the bag of weed, because it was wedged against the backside of my ankle. “OK, you’re clear!” he announced, and so I was. Never been clearer.

“You just scared the shit out of me,” Hub said. “Nothing to worry about,” I replied. “I’m invisible.” Hey, when you’ve already died and gone to heaven, and your heart is innocent of malice or harm, what could stand between you and the greatest monument to the departed? A few steps forward around a corner, and there it stood, shyly emerging from the morning fog. Oh! *C’est beau!*

Waves of viral joy overwhelmed my rheumy frame. Feverish, dizzy on pseudophedrine flu meds, nose running like Niagara, still I advanced toward the hulking palace framed by tilting minarets, ready to lie down and die again within its polished marble vault.

Just being at the Taj Mahal seems to make people happy, although I got so annoyed with the relentless hustlers that I summarily declared them “invisible” to the

point of sneering rudeness, and mourned how great a spiritual experience could also unleash such an ugly nature within me. India was great, but Indians were assholes to be avoided when possible, exploited when necessary, and never, ever, believed. Oh, Bwana.

Hub called me on this bad attitude, and I did feel guilty as well as foolish. Why go all the way to India only to make yourself miserable? You have to take people as they are and adjust to the social expectations of any given culture, just to survive, and by all means keep a sense of humor.

And the Taj Mahal is as good a place as any to embrace humanity in all its guises. The crowd there is global, folks come from everywhere in the world, many languages are spoken, and especially the universal language of laughter and sighs of wondrous contentment. The monument itself is a thing of astonishing beauty, every inch embellished with elaborate details which shimmer in sunlight and glow under the moon. It turned me around. With death so glamorous, why not be happy all the time?

You know when you're sick, really sick, you experience reality as if in a bubble or cocoon. I was delirious inside the crypt, looking for the corpses among the crush of living bodies bearing tiny cell phone cameras. Back outside, I had to sit down before falling down, and watched the grand gem undulate, gleam, and seem to sway. Way to go. If I had to die again, this was a fine place to do it.