

opinion

Summer reading

In 1984, I spent three months traveling independently through the upper third of India. As a journalist, I found no shortage of things to write about, but among the things that surprised me most was that I felt as if I had the place to myself.

I visited the Taj Mahal under a full moon with just a handful of other tourists. I spent two days in Ranthambore National Park photographing abundant tigers but encountered only one other tourist Jeep. I was the sole Westerner on a bus to the Himalayan region of Ladakh, where the Buddhist architecture and religious sites rival those in Tibet.

I was, I thought smugly, a traveler, not a tourist.

Over 25 years, things change. As a tourism destination, India has undergone significant development, but most of that has occurred in just the last six years. The story of its fast-track evolution is revealed in a riveting new book, "Branding India: An Incredible Story" (Collins Business, 2009), authored by Amitabh Kant, the man behind the "Incredible

India" campaign.

It's well written and attractively packaged, and it incorporates many supporting components (the collection of Incredible India print ads alone is worth the cover price). But one of the elements I found most thought-provoking was a reprint of the winning entry in a domestic essay contest on the topic "What tourism means to me."

The entry's author, Asavari Singh, writes: "Tourism is all about a transcendence of the ordinary, an experience that doesn't always characterize travel. ... An organized tourism industry does not attempt to disguise truth. ... It simply distills the best for you to savor. Why wait to feel the breathless relief of the mauled survivor when you can enjoy [attractions] secure in the knowledge

that you have a comfortable bed and a well-planned itinerary waiting?"

"I don't want to confound my subjective experience of India's remarkable natural and cultural bounty with a nagging awareness of physical discomfort or worry about whom to trust and where to go. ... Tourism to me is about escaping the ordinary ... reminding myself that there is more to life here than heat, dust and traffic jams."

Most of us who have a few decades of travel under our belts have evolved in that period as much as the destinations we visit. I still like to travel independently in less-visited countries, and I seldom worry about comfort, but these days, owing to time pressures (and children), the majority of my trips most closely resemble tourism as Singh defines it. And it turns out that I'm delighted to take advantage of tourism's distillation process, as I did last year on a visit to Kerala, in southern India.

There's a connection, I believe, between the successful Incredible India branding campaign (tourism expenditures have grown almost 300% since its launch in 2002) and my satisfaction with being a "tourist" in India. While I might no longer feel I have India to myself, neither do I feel my experience is ordinary; with tourism expansion came a greater diversity of product.

As Kant's book shows, Incredible India was much more than an ad campaign. It required the entire tourism infrastructure — hospital-ity, aviation, hosting operations — to deliver on the brand's promise.

And it demonstrates that among the developments that can occur in a branding campaign is the transformation of confirmed travelers into surprisingly happy tourists.

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