

Ajanta Caves

Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India - February 1, 2008

Amy:

We woke up and went to the buffet, which was in a room near the pool. The waiters in all of the buffet places in hotels are all dressed in suits, I should add. I told one of the waiters about our worries re. driving to Ajanta (2 hour drive, but we'd asked our driver to go slow enough to make it a 3 hour drive). [Naresh: When getting a driver, we're learning it's better to ask for a "slow" driver rather than a "good" driver. I think "slow" and "good" have opposite meanings.] The waiter, like everyone else we've met, assured me that we'd be fine. After breakfast, we went to the lobby and met our driver and a guide. The guide's name was Ayaz, and he was the most articulate of our guides and the most scholarly (he has a masters in history). For most of the ride to Ajanta, we peppered Ayaz with questions about religion, history, pre-history, culture, the caves, customs, etc. Needless to say, we had many questions and he answered all of them.

The first part of the drive was through small villages and farms. We were told that the crops grown in this region (Aurangabad in the state of Maharashtra) are cotton, sugarcane, wheat, millet, and a whole lot more. We even saw teepees but didn't get a picture. This area was clearly much more fertile than Rajasthan. There were many men wearing all-white outfits with small white caps (I think Ayaz said they were called "Ghandi caps").

The women, Muslim and Hindu, all wore beautiful silk saris; silk is a big export of Aurangabad.

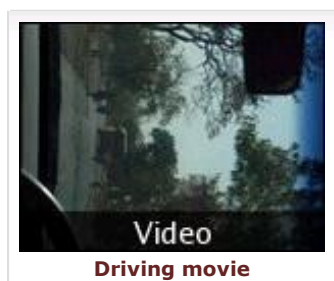


Motorcycle drivers often wore white cloth coverings over the faces, with

only their eyes exposed. Brent and I called them "invisible men". There were many buses on the route to Ajanta – most of which had swastikas on the back and the phrase, "Honk, please". The swastika was originally a Hindu symbol, Ayaz told us, and was a sign of good or bad karma (lines going up to heaven, down to hell). The Nazis took the symbol, changed the direction of the lines, and made it their own. It's a little disconcerting to see that symbol everywhere – on shops, buses, hotels, clothing. [Naresh: Indians are of Aryan descent, according to many historians such as our guide, which is probably another connection the Nazis flashed on.]

We stopped for tea (which was 10 rupees for 2 cups = 25 cents) and met a teacher from South Carolina who taught at a college I'd never heard of and was also on way to Ajanta with a driver and guide. He was allergic to cilantro, so we discussed this, and he recommended a restaurant near the Ellora caves, which he'd been to the day before.

As we drove closer to the caves, the roads became narrower and windier as we drove around a mountain.



We passed a view of the valley that looked like a small Grand Canyon, with colorful red-toned sides. We were a little scared during the drive, so we decided to look at the views out the side of the car and not the front. Our driver, like all other drivers we've had, seemed to be in a rush and eager to pass every other car on the road,



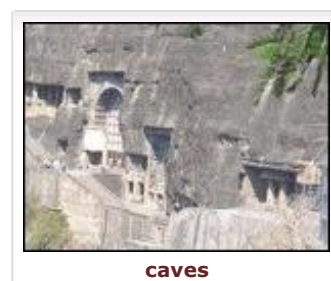
even if this meant heading into oncoming traffic. This was a theme in almost every drive we've taken. Tailgating closely, side-by-side with motorcycles, rickshaws, and slower trucks, then veering into oncoming traffic and heading straight for another car or bus – practically playing chicken – is commonplace here in India. And soooooo scary! So we stopped looking ahead of us on the road. [Naresh: It is also common in the daily paper to read about traffic fatalities. There is always something to blame (e.g. fighting bulls, dust, debris falling from a truck) but I haven't seen blame placed on the general no-margin-for-error driving philosophy.]

We arrived at the caves at around 11:30 am, along with many other tourists, most of them Indian. We boarded a shuttle bus to the caves then got off the bus and steered through a group of hawkers and "touts" (people wanting to lead you to a particular stand) who were very persistent, almost aggressive. Our guide had warned us about the hawkers, saying they couldn't be trusted and were all liars. We walked up a steep pathway to the top of the caves.



There was a chair that could be carried up the pathway, which I was close to taking :) It was a steep and difficult walk, but we made it. I was so glad we had bottled water (which, btw, everyone in India drinks, not just tourists).

The Ajanta caves were wonderful – all 30 are Buddhist caves from 1500 bc. which makes them the oldest man-made caves in the world (!)



[Naresh: My memory is that the oldest were about 200 BC, which is still pretty damn old.] These caves are famous for the paintings in the cave and the Buddhist carvings, which were very intricate and elaborate. All of the Ajanta caves are Buddhist, while the Ellora caves are Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain. In the Ajanta caves, there were also residences (small rooms) carved out of the caves where the monks lived.

The caves were warmer than I thought they'd be, and we were glad we'd brought enough bottled water (we'd

gotten 2 bottles free/day at the hotel). Brent and I couldn't stop singing "Bodhisattva" by Steely Dan the entire time we were there, which was about 3 hours total. It's a hard song to get out of your head... Our guide taught us about Buddhism, Bodhisattva, the history of caves, and preservation techniques. The caves were abandoned then rediscovered in the early 1900s by a British hunting party.



Apparently, Buddhists from all over the world make pilgrimages to see the caves – our guide explained that many Japanese Buddhist tourists visit the cave (we saw lots of Japanese tourists). We saw 2 Tibetan monks, so I was able to impress everyone with my vast knowledge of Tibetan language. They did look startled when I started chatting in Tibetan, which made my last trip to India worthwhile. There was also a rowdy group of Korean tourists at our hotel who partied all night. But back to the caves...

[Naresh: I showed our guide a picture of the reclining Buddha we'd seen in Thailand, and he said "yes, that is a copy of the reclining Buddha we'll see here in cave #X" which proved to be the case.]

[Naresh: The really amazing thing about these caves is to realize that they were all totally carved into the rock. There are no natural caves at all, just carvings. To make all the sculptures they had to find suitable rock, plan, and carve over many years and generations. And each room, pillar, and sculpture had to be carved from the top down. Free-standing statues. Pillars perfectly aligned. One ceiling in a moment of undulating as if were a canopy in the breeze; another ceiling appearing to be made of timber. Simply amazing.]



Our guide had a flashlight, which he used in the caves to show us the sculptures and paintings. He liked to point out that the Ajanta artists had good knowledge of the female form.

He, too, seemed to have good knowledge, and used his flashlight to linger on the female forms. Since no flash photography was allowed in the caves, I couldn't use my camera (I couldn't figure out how to turn off the flash) but Brent's iPhone worked well.

Naresh:

On the way back from the caves we stopped near the caves at a "hotel" which was really a restaurant, for a "light lunch", but again I ordered too much. Outside the restaurant many men and women were pounding on piles of black rock



like that found in the cave. I don't know why they were doing that. I doubt it was to make the pleasant sound of a crackling fire just for our benefit, but that's exactly what it sounded like from inside the restaurant.

Our guide ordered chicken gravy, which he told us is chicken with a curry sauce: the curry didn't taste like curry, and "gravy"

is a catchall term, we gathered. We also learned that "mutton" is goat, not sheep. Interesting.

We got back to our hotel around 4 or 5. I went to the gym to run on the treadmill (I don't dare run anywhere else), while Amy sat by the pool and ordered a crustless cheese sandwich. I'd started to get a weird rash on my hands and legs while coming back from the caves, and it got a lot worse when I heated up in the gym. Also, my hotel buddy Atul showed up so I stopped after a half hour and chatted more with him. We continued our discussion from the previous day about Indian and American cultural differences. He wondered if families really live as far apart as we'd heard, and whether it was true that hardly anyone followed in the profession of their parents. He told me about many smart Indian friends who'd gone to America to earn like Americans and spend like Indians, so they returned with a large savings; and others not as smart who earned like Americans but also spent like Americans and so came back with nothing. We also talked about how Delhi had changed in becoming much cleaner and better organized, and he said it was due to the trend toward privatization of those services.

My skin was starting to feel kind of icky and I wasn't hungry, and Amy had eaten a sandwich around the pool, so we skipped dinner and went to bed early, watching I-don't-remember-what.

Commentary: Again and again we're impressed at the variety of different types of people (and animals) that are all living together in this India *mélange*. It's interesting that everyone seems to be so accepting of others being different than them, and that's heartwarming. Everyone says "there's no problem, we all get along", but at the same time everyone also seems to know exactly what caste everyone else is (where things like "Muslim" are also effectively considered a caste), and that cannot be a sign of underlying acceptance. We so far have not met anyone who would consider marrying outside their caste. I'm pretty sure one driver cut off some kids because they weren't the right type. We've had a Muslim guide say, "Hinduism isn't a religion, it's a zoo." Another American couple had one Hindu driver who wouldn't take them to a Muslim part of town because he either didn't know that part of town or didn't feel welcome there. And finally, almost everyone says something like "we all get along, but if there *is* trouble it's not going to be *my* caste that starts

it.” And there’s the recurring histories of partition, bombings, BJP and other party rhetoric, and conflicts. All of this leaves me with the queasy feeling that India is always one bad racial/caste/religious incident from exploding.

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