



India intrigues visitors from Fresno State

By Joan Sharma and Brijesh Sharma

For 13 days a group that included Fresno State students, former students and community members, took a close look at northern India, visiting sites of historical, religious and architectural interest and encountering hospitality that extended to a parade in our honor and a group meditation.

Our 13-day tour began with our arrival at Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport, where each of us received a long-stemmed rose. It didn't take long until the next display of hospitality when we were greeted at the Taj Mahal Hotel – one of India's finest – with a jasmine and rose garland.

The tour was more than just a vacation. Like other programs through Fresno State's Division of Global Education and Extended Learning is was designed as an educational experience, exposing participants to the history, customs and people of northern India.



In Delhi, we visited Qutub Minar – an ancient Hindu capital conquered by Muslim rulers in the 12th century – famed for its high minaret and red sandstone monuments decorated with Arabic calligraphy carved by Hindu artisans.

At the majestic Baha'i Lotus Temple, we saw one of Delhi's most frequently photographed buildings, and then the second Mughal Emperor Humayun's tomb, whose architects and designers appear to have influenced some aspects of the Taj Mahal. Our busy day concluded with folk and Indian classical dance performed in Parsi Anjuman, the Zoroastrian fire temple of Delhi.

Traveling to Agra, we stopped at an archaeological museum famous for its sandstone and metal sculpture from the first century during the Kushan Dynasty. The Kushans originally were Han Chinese who migrated towards Afghanistan in the second and third centuries BCE and intermarried with Greeks, who stayed after Alexander the Great returned to Macedonia.

By the first century, when they conquered northwestern India, their facial features resembled people of Greek origin and they had converted to Hinduism and Buddhism. Sculpture from this period depicts both religions' deities with Greek features and flowing Greek robes.

At the mausoleum of the third Mughal Emperor, Akbar, popularly called Sikandara, the main entry gate into vast geometrically planned



Left: Jodhpur's hilltop fort of Mehrangarh is home to a museum exhibiting 15th- to 17th-century relics. Above: In Delhi is Qutub Minar, famed for its red sandstone monuments.

Right: Dawn light and mist greet a Fresno State group visiting the Taj Mahal, whose facade (bottom) is intricately carved.



Fresno State study tours get travelers close to people such as a man (top) in Jaipur. A Nimaaj vendor's vegetables (bottom) look familiar to San Joaquin Valley visitors.



gardens is more impressive than the mausoleum. This entrance gate was added during the reign of the fourth Mughal Emperor, Jahangir.

We left our hotel at 5.30 a.m. to witness sunrise over the Taj Mahal. As the Taj Mahal emerged from the night's fog, its white marble surface constantly changed color reflecting the changing light. We remained there three hours to admire, reflect on and photograph this work of inspired and majestic design.

After this breathtakingly beautiful monument, we visited a local factory where descendants of artisans who worked on the construction and intricate inlay at the Taj Mahal continue to create beautiful objects using marble and semiprecious stones. Today's artisans work with the same implements used 300 years ago.

As we were leaving Agra, we stopped at the white marble palaces at Agra Fort, where the fifth Mughal Emperor, Shahjahan, was kept prisoner by his own son during the last eight years of his life.

About an hour's drive west of Agra is another World Heritage Site - Fatehpur Sikri, home to the palaces and mosque of the third Mughal Emperor, Akbar, a visionary who established the capital so he could enjoy the company of Sufi spiritual master Sheikh Salim Chistie, who had prophesied that the emperor would have three sons. The architecture reflects the emperor's tolerant and liberal religious philosophy.

Our tour continued to the rose pink city of Jaipur - a capital established by Hindu Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II in 1727 and planned to reflect the founder's interest in astronomy and the ancient Hindu treatise on city planning, the "Shilpa Shastras."

Jaipur was constructed in 1876 to honor a visit by the Prince of Wales. All building facades were painted with distinctive pink mineral paint. We stopped at the Hawa Mahal (Palace of Winds), a viewing gallery only three feet deep with finely carved lattice screens designed so royal ladies could watch the Maharaja's ceremonial processions in privacy without being seen by the public on the streets below.

Before Jaipur's construction, Kacchawaha Rajput ruled from the Fort of Amber perched high on a hilltop. We were carried by beautifully decorated, hardworking elephants up a winding path to the hilltop palaces in Amber Fort, whose architecture is an intriguing mixture of Hindu Rajput and Mughal. The palaces of Maharaja Jai Singh I are noted for tiny convex mirrors cut into ornamental shapes and inlaid in plaster on the walls.

Jaipur is famous for its City Palace, where descendants of the former royal family continue to live. The public areas of this palace house India's largest collection of beautiful Mughal and pre-Mughal miniature paintings and manuscripts in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic. Just outside is Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh's impressive astronomical observatory, where all but one of its 29 astronomical instruments continues to function and the large sundial is accurate to seven seconds.

Between Jaipur and Jodhpur (the Blue City), we had lunch in the ancient Nimaaj Castle, situated on a hilltop surrounded by the village of Nimaaj. We rode on brightly



visited Jodhpur's hilltop fort of Mehrangarh and its museum to view 15th-17th century relics.

Our next stop was in the lush valley of Ranakpur, where the Chaturmukh Jain Temple is surrounded by the Aravali Mountains, shimmering like a pearl in a sea of emeralds. The chief priest offered to lead meditation for our group. He chanted ancient Sanskrit verses that resonated throughout the stone temple constructed in the 15th century of marble and white granite. Each pillar in the courtyards is uniquely carved and decorated, while the interior is filled with intricate sculpture.

After visiting the City Palace in Udaipur, the city of lakes and palaces, we boarded decorated boats on the shores of Lake Pichola for the trip to the 263-year-old Jag Niwas Lake Palace Hotel to enjoy a sumptuous lunch. The hotel is on an island in the middle of the lake.

That evening, a local woman decorated the palms of some in our group with intricate henna motifs, and we celebrated the 40th birthday of one of our tour participants with a gala that included decorative lighting in the garden and stage, local folk performances, a DJ, lively music, dancing and fireworks.

A short drive north of Udaipur is the small, ancient kingdom of Devgahr, where we stayed in the exquisitely renovated, hilltop castle of the former Raja of Devgahr. Some participants went horseback riding for a few hours throughout the countryside and surrounding villages before our drive back to Jaipur and the train back to Delhi for our return flight Jan. 6, 2007.

- The 2006/07 winter break "Northern India Study Tour" was led by Joan Sharma, associate professor in the Department of Art and Design, and her husband, Brijesh Sharma, CEO of India Traveller LLC.



Joan and Brijesh Sharma at the President's Gallery in the Thomas Administration building during an exhibition of her photographs.



Top left: A Jainist priest meets with tour group member Lauren Crist at a temple in the Aravali Mountains. Top right: Study group members get a welcome parade in Nimaaj. Middle: Intricate henna designs are displayed by Fresno State study group members. Bottom: An attraction in Udaipur is vintage American cars.