

No 5

My Most Amazing Birthday – November 29th 2012

The following day was my birthday (my third 21st !) and what a day that turned out to be! We had an early breakfast because we needed to be out at the Amber Fort early before the queue for elephants got too long. At breakfast Davinder, our guide placed a garland of fragrant red roses around my neck. Then, as I got on the bus, the driver and the co-driver both placed garlands of marigolds around my neck as well! We headed off at 7.30am and drove through the Old City to the Palace of Winds. This was built in 1799 to enable the ladies of the royal harem a private place to watch the life and processions of the city. Five storeys high, it is one of Jaipur's most distinctive buildings. The pierced carved stone screen walls allowed the ladies to see out but no-one could see in. It also allowed cooling breezes through.

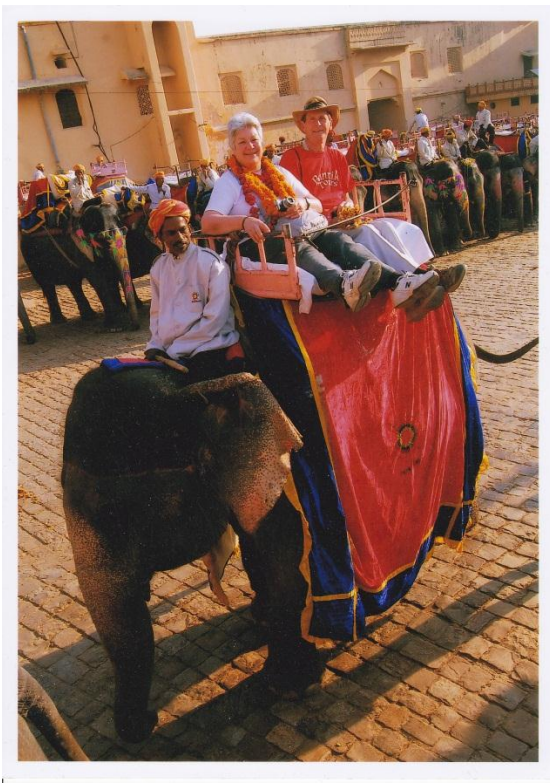


The gaily decorated birthday girl



The Palace of the Winds

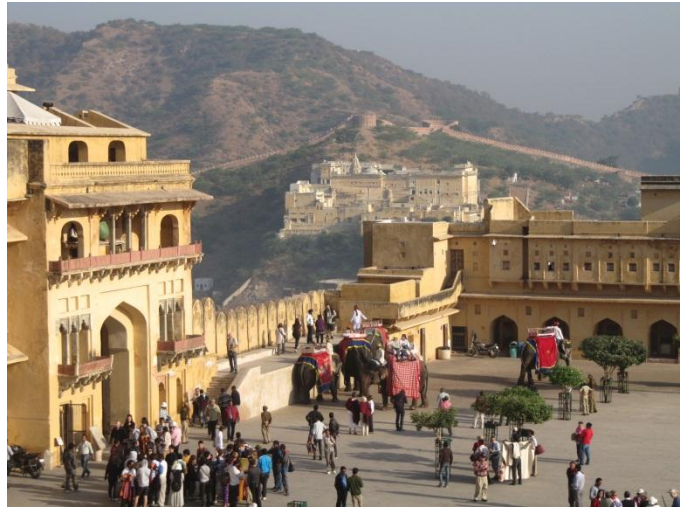
After a quick photo stop there it was off to the Amber fort which was built high on a hill top in 1592 as a defence against Moghul attack. There is quite a steep incline up to the entrance and a popular way to get up there is on elephants, which naturally we did.



In the mounting area with lots of elephants waiting

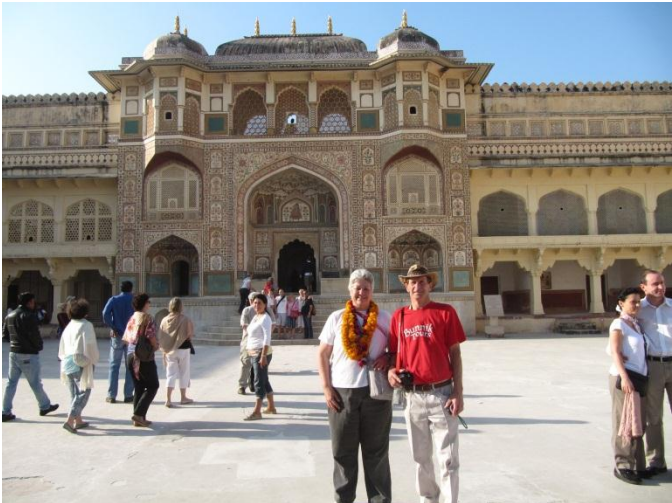


Half way up, about to go through the first gate



The Amber Fort . We mounted the elephants at the water level and climbed the route from the bottom right and disembarked our elephants in the courtyard at the top right.

The Maharajah's apartments are on the upper levels and there are several halls with inlaid panels and multi-mirrored ceilings. There is an artificial lake at the bottom of the hill and an ornate garden on a large island. This was planted with saffron and the delicate perfume wafted into their apartments through pierced screen walls - very clever early air-conditioning.



The front façade of the palace inside the Amber Fort



Reflected in one of the mirrors in the decorated audience hall



A beautiful courtyard garden



Another decorated public area

After coming down from the palace in jeeps, we returned to our tour bus and headed back into Jaipur. The Jaipur region is famous for its semi-precious stones and for the jewellery businesses that have developed. We visited one of the main jewellery showrooms and were given a demonstration of cutting and polishing. Naturally there was a bit of sales pitch and some of our party bought some quite expensive items. To smooth the process we were given delicious samosas and pakora to eat and washed down with chai tea. That formed lunch, and then it was off to see the most amazing observatory built by the Maharajah in 1728, just after he had set out the city. He was a keen amateur astronomer and built a number of huge sundials which not only tell the time but chart the zodiac as well. The world's largest sundial with a 27m high gnomon has a shadow which moves 4m in an hour.



One half of the world's biggest sun dial



Guards at the City Palace wanted their picture taken with the birthday girl!

Then it was on to the City Palace to marvel at some of the royal costumes dating back several centuries. Some of the saris still had brilliant colours and gold thread woven through. The most amazing exhibit was one costume belonging to Maharajah Singh I - he weighed 250kg, stood 2m tall and 1.2m wide. He apparently had 108 wives, but died of a heart attack aged 43! Small wonder.



Part of the Palace now houses costumes



Inside the public audience hall



Then we returned to the hotel for birthday cake. It had been quite a day up to that point. Time for a couple of hours of rest before we set off again

Our guide Davinder had been invited to a 25th wedding anniversary party that night, but had told the hosts that he couldn't go as he was with us. They insisted that we all come too - so we did! The hosts were a multi-squillionaire business man and his wife and they had invited 1000 of their closest friends! Davinder said that normally Indians don't celebrate wedding anniversaries but that in this case it was probably a way of cementing business relationships and networking which is why so many people were there. It was held in an open air venue and was to start from 8.00pm. We got rather lost on the way and stuck in traffic, being the middle of the wedding season and lots of weddings spilling out into streets, even on a Thursday night. Because an astrologer is consulted to decide on the most auspicious day to get married, weddings can happen on any day of the week in India. We arrived at the party at about 9.00pm and made our way through the crush to the stage at the far end. Centre stage were the host and hostess, surrounded by their children and other family. A line of visitors mounted steps onto the stage and moved across to greet the couple and then have a photo taken with them. When our turn came our guide introduced us all. The floral arrangement we brought was duly added to a collection at the rear of the stage and then we gathered around them and had our photo taken. After that we were free to roam around the three sides of the venue where various forms of food preparation was going on - all vegetarian and all the drinks were non-alcoholic! After an hour of people watching the other guests and filling ourselves up, we were entertained by some well known Indian singers and musicians and then had a fire works display burst right over our heads, with burning bits of paper falling on our clothes and on the ground around.



Our group with our hosts



Cinderella about to pack her pumpkin and steal away.



Then we went home - the poor host & hostess were still marooned on stage receiving guests - just when they got to eat anything I've got no idea.

And so ended the most amazing and unrepeatabe birthday this girl has ever had!

