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Ken Bernhard with a baby elephant in India



An Indian Adventure

COURTESY: KEN BERNHARD

I don't think I understood the true scope of the word adorable until I bottle fed a baby elephant, led it to its sheltered sleeping quarters, draped it with a blanket, set out a mattress, and witnessed it lie down and go to sleep.

My daughter and I recently returned from a trip to India. It was truly an adventure. Of the 30 plus countries I have visited, I believe India is the most unique. It is complex and colorful; and the ever present energy being dispersed by its 1.2 billion people (one sixth of the world's population), as they strive to co-exist and survive, is overpowering.

Just venturing into a street, on foot or in a car, is like entering an amusement park with never-before-seen sights and sounds interspersed with action-packed thrills. We traveled by car, plane and train, on foot, in bike transports and on the backs of elephants. Throughout, we were gawking, endeavoring to absorb everything there was to witness.

In the cities, we saw monuments of great history, gorgeously ornate temples, traditionally dressed women in colorful attire, markets of every kind, ever present street people, great numbers of overloaded modes of transport, and unique curbside services like dentistry and barbering. Safe travel relies on the car's horn as much as on brakes, while people navigate through the overwhelming numbers of automobiles, two and three wheeled bikes, big and small

On a trip to observe the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation centers in India, **Ken Bernhard** discovers the India of Rudyard Kipling and the India of 2012

trucks, pedestrians, cows, dogs, beggars, and street vendors, all of whom seem to have perfected an urban ballet of which we were unaware.

Outside of the cities, after seeing the congestion in the urban environment, we saw more open space and agricultural land than we thought possible. The countryside vistas were beautiful in settings that have remained the same for countless years. There were people hauling great loads on bikes or upon their heads, women washing clothes in rivers or by well pumps, and countless numbers of strolling cows with indiscernible destinations. The well attended rice and wheat fields stretched out beyond the horizons.

Our primary objective in visiting was to observe the wildlife rescue and rehabilitation centers operated by our host, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (based in Cape Cod) and its partner, Wildlife Trust of India.

IFAW advocates against animal cruelty and depletion, rescues animals in the wake of disasters, and assists all sorts of domestic

and wild animals in need.

Even considering everything else we had to absorb in India, Kaziranga National Park was most memorable. We were permitted to do what only our special status allowed: See firsthand baby, orphaned creatures being cared for with the hope that they would eventually be returned to the wilderness. We tended numerous baby rhinos, a three-month-old Bengal tiger, primates, two leopards, birds, and a number of very cute young elephants.

The memories will make me smile for a long time.

At a reserve in Kanha, India, we ventured out on two occasions into the wilderness at 6 am with a local naturalist in an open jeep, freezing in the cold morning air as we searched for tigers prowling for their day's meal. We drove for hours on barely discernible roads through jungle and bush. We saw many other creatures, but were able to find only one tiger. The magnificently striped creature was curled up by the side of the road, indifferent to our presence. It had all the regal presence memorialized

in the writings of Rudyard Kipling and we imagined its solitary life as one of the most dominant predators on earth.

The return to New Delhi involved an overnight train ride and because of some administrative misstep, we lost our first class compartment and were placed in a second class one. The mistake turned out to be fortuitous, though, because we met a lovely Indian couple who were returning home from a wedding and whose English was sufficiently fluent to allow us to exchange stories and insights. Sleeping on the compartment's narrow bench, with a small pillow and clean linen, was remarkably more comfortable than either of us anticipated.

A lingering memory of the trip is the image of economic disparity on every street corner, turn in the road, shopping area and residential community. At first, it was distressing to witness and while we never became oblivious to it, we did come to accept it as part of the fabric of life in India. Further, we learned that a small gesture of goodwill could become an invitation to attract an unwelcome mob. We accommodated this realization, more easily than I would have thought possible, and resisted, for the most part, giving small gifts to obviously needy persons. Nevertheless, complete stoicism is not possible and our daily routine included many small acts of