

Curiosity runs both ways for solo female traveller in India

By Kristi Eaton
The Associated Press

JODHPUR, India — The blue-tinted dwellings looked like they continued on for miles. From high above the ancient Indian city of Jodhpur, it was easy to see how it became known as the “Blue City.”

I caught a view of these sky-blue homes while visiting the 15th-century Mehrangarh Fort, which includes a palace, temples, and garden at the end of a winding road looking down on the city.

Though this was my first visit to India, my perspective on a month-long trip there was not entirely that of an ordinary tourist. I was travelling from one side of the country to the other, researching issues facing women and girls. Jodhpur, in Rajasthan State, was on my itinerary because it is an area with high rates of female illiteracy and child marriage, and a preference for sons over daughters.

But in addition to my research, interviews, and writing, I made time for sightseeing and experiencing local culture. At the Mehrangarh Fort, I stumbled on the Turban Gallery, which tells of the history, traditions, and variety of turbans found in Rajasthan. And I happened to be in Ahmedabad, in the west, where I'd entered the country, in time for a wonderful annual spectacle: the colorful International Kite Festival.

In Jodhpur, I befriended a family who invited me to an extravagant Hindu wedding. I thoroughly enjoyed sampling the food and observing the ceremonies and elaborate outfits. But even though I stayed near the family who invited me, being a solo western woman at such an event didn't come without stares and looks of befuddlement from other attendees.

I had come to India to look at gender issues in this complex culture. Among other things, I visited a school for



INDIA IMPRESSIONS. A group of women prepare a dish called mahua laddoo to sell at a local market in Chatwal, India. An American woman travelling alone across India came to the country to look at gender issues in the complex culture, but she often found she was as much an object of curiosity to locals as they were to her. (Kristi Eaton via AP)

Udaipur in Rajasthan — all with a goal of empowering women who might otherwise feel forced to hide their scars. I felt a bit shy about engaging the women in conversation on my first visit, but on my second, I opened myself up and found they were eager to share stories despite a language barrier that kept the conversations basic.

Making safe choices

In the back of my mind, I couldn't help but think about some of the horrific assaults on women in India — both locals and tourists — that have made headlines.

So I made very deliberate choices about my dress and behavior. I always wore loose-fitting pants, a t-shirt, and often times a shawl-like cover up. I only had wine on one occasion and rarely stayed out after dark unless I was with someone whom I trusted. And rather than taking long-haul trains on my own, I hired a driver to take me from one destination to the next. It was expensive, but worthwhile for the ability to sleep, relax, and work during the sometimes eight- to 12-hour trips. Within cities, I used auto rickshaws, cabs, and services like Uber.

I was never harassed, but I did regularly receive stares — something that had not happened during trips I'd taken to other countries like Indonesia, Guatemala, and Vietnam. In some small ways, my travels here had allowed me to experience some of the cultural attitudes toward gender that I'd come to research.

Kristi Eaton spent a month in India as a fellow with the International Reporting Project.

underprivileged girls, met female entrepreneurs, and looked at a program that makes sanitary napkins available to rural women. But sometimes, it seemed I was as much an object of curiosity to locals as their culture was to me.

Standing out from the crowd

One challenge for me was getting used to standing out from the crowd.

In Ahmedabad, on one of my first few days in India, I desperately wanted a cup of coffee ahead of an interview. I was waiting for another woman who would help me translate at the interview and decided to head to a street vendor for a quick cup. I'd already drawn attention to myself, walking up and down the street looking for the translator, and now I found myself the only woman among a throng of men.

They seemed perplexed by my arrival, but ended up helping me order the tiny coffee and left me alone as I sipped on a bench. I didn't know Hindi or the local Gujarat language, so I didn't try to engage in conversation. But that feeling of

standing out was something I had to get used to.

Some days it was no big deal. Other days — when I felt responsible for keeping up a conversation, making sure I was safe, and doing my best to be culturally aware while exploring sensitive subjects around gender inequality — it was exhausting.

Sheroes

Like many first-time visitors to India, I went to Agra to see the Taj Mahal and also stopped at the Agra Fort. Not far from those attractions was another stop on my itinerary: the Sheroes Hangout.

Sheroes Hangout is a café run by survivors of acid attacks — women who were scarred in assaults stemming from family disputes, unrequited love, or other conflicts. The café also features a small library and handicraft and exhibit space. Other Sheroes Hangouts are located in Lucknow, in Uttar Pradesh, and in



MARKETING MAYHEM. Residents renting from bike-sharing company Ofo try to pedal through a sidewalk crowded with bicycles from the many bike-sharing companies in the city — including Ofo, Mobike, and Bluegogo — near a bus stop in Beijing, China. As many as 2.2 million of the two-wheelers have been deployed in China, which are available for rent for as little as seven U.S. cents per half-hour. China overtook the United States in 2009 as the world's biggest auto market, but authorities have encouraged bicycle use to reduce pollution and congestion. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

Bike-sharing rivalry crowds Beijing's sidewalks

BEIJING (AP) — The shiny bicycles in bright orange, yellow, or blue are everywhere in China's most prosperous cities, even in places they probably shouldn't be.

The two-wheelers are unlocked and tracked using smartphone apps and can be rented for as little as seven U.S. cents per half-hour. They are the latest symbol of heavy spending by venture capital firms in China's internet sector, where startups are racing to attract more users, seemingly regardless of the cost.

Around 2.2 million bicycles have been deployed in China by companies that include Ofo, Mobike, and Bluegogo, and are most frequently used in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, according to internet analyst Xue Yu at IDC China.

In their rivalry to be market leader in

bike-sharing, the companies have raised hundreds of millions of dollars and are offering discounts and free rides to attract more users. It's unclear if the business model is sustainable or how it might change if a winner emerges.

China was long known as the “bicycle kingdom,” but that moniker has become outdated as more and more Chinese buy cars amid the country's economic boom. China overtook the United States in 2009 as the world's biggest auto market, but authorities have encouraged bicycle use to reduce pollution and congestion.

Shared bicycles are now ubiquitous in Beijing, where Xue estimates more than 200,000 have been deployed.

They're pedalled on the roads by com-

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First the good news: We're making much-needed repairs to MAX tracks in Downtown Portland to bring you a smoother and more reliable ride.

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Thanks for your patience as we work to make MAX better!



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