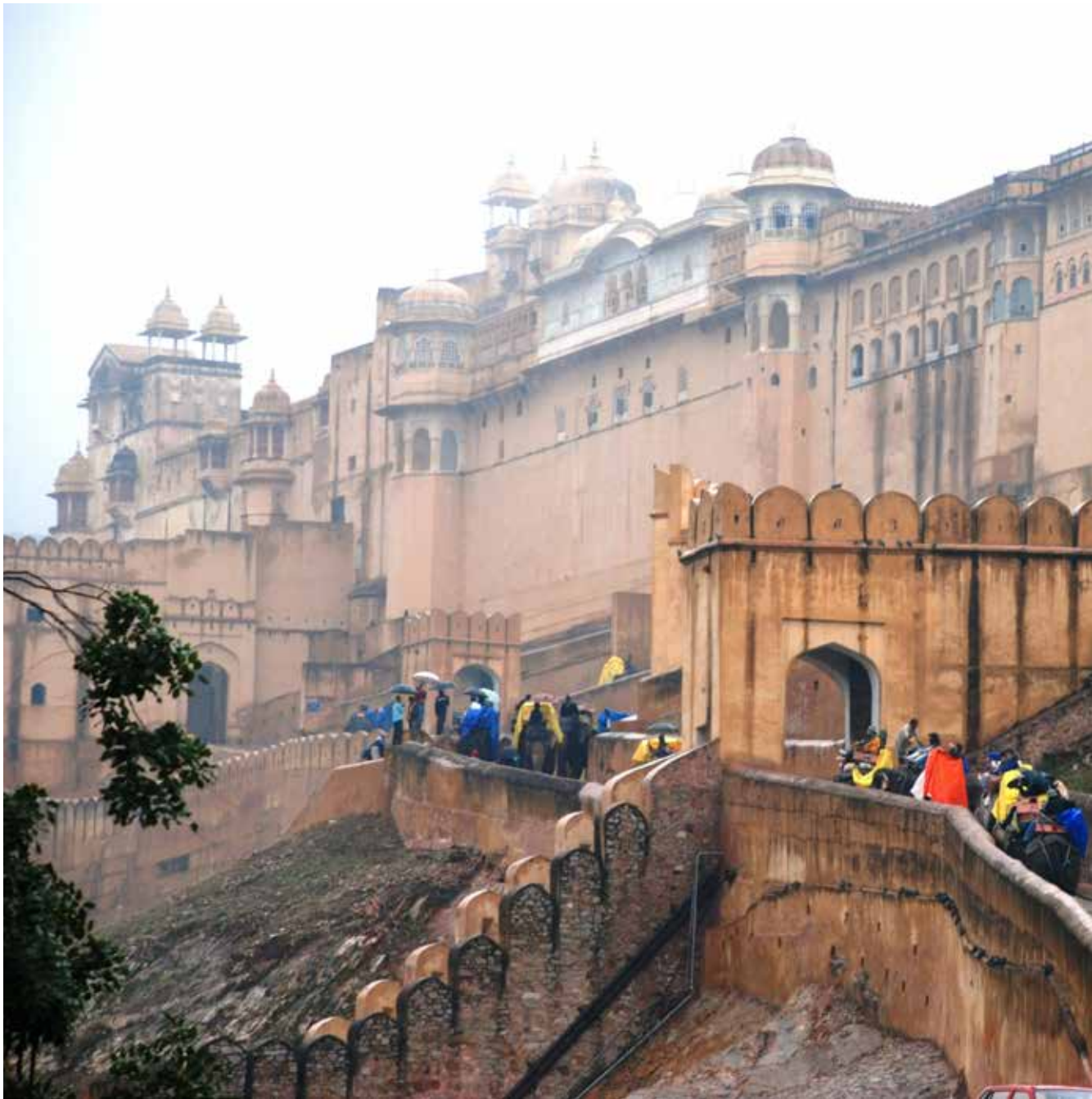


ARTICLE SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTOGRAPHY
THE TRAVELING BORNSTEINS



GRATEFUL TO BE AN AMERICAN



FOR CENTURIES, AMERICANS HAVE GATHERED IN LATE NOVEMBER TO REMEMBER EARLY AMERICAN HISTORY AND SHARE FEELINGS OF GRATITUDE WHILE EATING A FESTIVE MEAL.

Even when my travels took me abroad, I found a way to celebrate this harvest festival. Due to circumstances beyond my control, my plans for an expat Thanksgiving in India did not come to fruition. Instead of joining my family at a makeshift feast, I spent the night in a Delhi hospital awaiting surgery the next day.

A little more than a decade ago, I had the once in a lifetime opportunity to work as a teacher in a highly respected international school in Bangalore, India. Unlike my expat colleagues who were single and in their 20s, I was married and had four adult children. Most of my American friends and extended family members felt I was crazy to leave behind my suburban Denver life. While my trepidations were overwhelming, I stepped outside of my comfort zone when I accepted the job offer to teach 5th graders at The International School Bangalore (TISB). After arriving in India, waves of unrelenting culture shock knocked me off balance.

It was challenging to adapt to an unfamiliar environment when a tsunami of bewilderment engulfed me. Eventually, I learned to adjust and accept my new life. However, I must admit that I never reached the stage where I felt completely comfortable with my surroundings.

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My expat life in India was the antithesis of my former life in Colorado. Despite the physical and emotional challenges, I remain grateful for the opportunity to live and teach abroad. This experience expanded my understanding of another culture and simultaneously intensified my gratitude for being an American citizen.

Living as an expat cannot be compared to being a visitor. My expat commitment was for two years and not limited to a handful of weeks. From my Bangalore accommodations, I took a solo day trip to the Hoysala temples—Belur and Halebeedu, explored the Golden Triangle with family members, enjoyed weekends with my son and future daughter-in-law in Delhi, traveled with my husband to Pune on a business trip, chaperoned my fifth-grade class for a multi-day stay at the Kabini River Lodge, and joined two expat teaching colleagues for a memorable trip to Cochin and Munnar during our Dussehra school break.

My travels throughout India opened my eyes to architectural landmarks like the Taj Mahal, the Agra Fort, and the 16th century Paradesi Synagogue. I observed regional differences in customs and foods while also learning bits and pieces of Indian history. Had my stay in India not been cut short by significant health concerns, I would have had more opportunities to explore the complexity of Indian culture and history.

While living in, working in, and exploring throughout India, I concluded that I was fortunate to have been born and raised in suburban Chicago. As an American child, I was never concerned about the possibility of drinking polluted water from my home's kitchen sink, not having hot water for a shower, nor experiencing inconsistent electrical power at random points in the day. My parent's suburban Chicago home was equipped with a full array of modern





conveniences, including an oven, cooktop, dishwasher, garbage disposal, clothes dryer, central air conditioning, and a vacuum. Food purchased at the local grocery store and area restaurants rarely created gastrointestinal issues. At the age of 16, I obtained a driver's license which offered a new level of independence and freedom. I was no longer totally dependent on others for my transportation. My public-school teachers were fully trained, and my education opened the door to the opportunity of attending college. My gender did not prevent me from pursuing my desired career path.

Local, state, and federal regulations instilled traffic and safety laws, numerous safeguards against pollution, and protected bank deposits. Laws were occasionally violated but most people conformed to the government's rules. I didn't have to worry about wild animals roaming the streets or entering my living space. If I needed to see a doctor or visit the hospital, I felt confident that the facilities and medical equipment would be clean.

In India, I encountered a totally different scenario. Water was a precious commodity. It was never safe to drink tap water. Even when I ate cooked foods, diarrhea and frequent fevers were the norm. If I didn't flip the electrical switch near a small water tank 15 minutes before I wanted

to shower, the water would be cold. Electrical power in some cities was not guaranteed 24/7.

Modern American conveniences that I took for granted were no longer available. Instead of a cooktop, I used an apparatus that resembled an oversized Bunsen burner. My foods were prepared either on this open flame or in a microwave. I never saw a residential kitchen equipped with a full-sized oven or dishwasher. A primitive whisk broom replaced an electric vacuum cleaner. Often dishes and glasses were washed with cold water and left out to dry. The small hot water tank found in bathrooms was nowhere to be found in the kitchen. After living in the Northern Hemisphere for decades, my body struggled to adapt to the tropical heat and humidity being cooled by a ceiling fan.

As a teacher, I witnessed the inner workings of a prestigious, private Indian boarding school. During my job interview, the school administrators were not regulated by any labor or privacy laws. I didn't anticipate being asked for a list of my prescriptive medicines and medical conditions or how I raised my four children. Unlike American public-school teachers who are mandated to undergo specific training and certification, many of my Indian colleagues had no formal teacher education and were not certified by a local or national entity. One of the

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fifth-grade math/science teachers was a certified accountant who wrote the contents of the daily lesson on the whiteboard and asked the students to copy everything. The overall curriculum focused on a regurgitation of facts rather than analytic thinking. None of the teachers were aware of the basic theories associated with differentiated instruction or how to teach students who didn't speak English. English was a second language for most of the students in my class. With a limited number of popular book titles in the school library, I purchased second-hand books so my students could be exposed to multi-cultural, award-winning literature. Surprisingly, only one third of my classroom students were girls.

Even though I was a mature adult, it took weeks before I felt confident to cross the intersection of a main street. Few motorcycles and cars obeyed any basic rules of the road. Stoplights, one way street signs, and street lanes were frequently ignored. It was not uncommon to see motorcycles driving erratically on the sidewalk. After seeing the lack of decorum on the city streets, I had no interest in driving in India. Without a car, I lost my independence and became dependent on rickshaw drivers, taxis, and people who had cars.

In addition to cows wandering freely, I also came across goats, chickens, and packs of wild dogs on the public streets. Most troubling were the families of wild monkeys who were frequent visitors to my guestroom and classroom. They gleefully walked away with the class' whiteboard markers as well as my food and underwear left on drying racks.

Less than ideal living conditions caused a plethora of health conditions requiring medical care. Masses of people seeking health care created long wait times at medical facilities. While the cost of medical care was a fraction of comparable services in the U.S., the questionable hygienic practices found in hospitals coupled with the doctors' mediocre communication skills created grave concerns, especially after being admitted to a hospital.



More than a decade after being an expat, I vividly recall the obvious differences between living in the U.S. and a developing country. The dichotomy between the two lifestyles illustrates the distinct advantages of living in the United States. America does have its own set of shortcomings, but when I compare my quality of life in America to living as an expat in India or visiting worldwide destinations, I remain grateful to be an American.

MAY THIS BE THE BEST YEAR OF YOUR LIFE

When Sandy Bornstein isn't trekking in Colorado or writing, she's traveling with her husband Ira. After living as an international teacher in Bangalore, India, Sandy published an award-winning book, *May This Be the Best Year of Your Life*, as a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle and living outside their comfort zone. As an award-winning travel writer, Sandy writes about food, history, health, wellness, and active midlife adventures highlighting land and water experiences.

