

An eye-opening view of Rajasthan

As we traveled through the countryside, I began to see the real India.

By Margie Goldsmith
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This must be a mistake. A clunky little car has just arrived to pick me up for the six-hour drive through Rajasthan. There's no guide, just a driver in his 60s, who, in a singsong Indian accent and a smile as wide as his cheeks, says, "Welcome. We go now. Long drive. My name, Swarm."

Puzzled, I climb into the car. "It's a six-hour drive, right?" I ask.

"Oh no – eight hours, maybe longer," he replies.

Eight hours? This will undoubtedly be the worst day of my trip.

Swarm starts the motor, then turns to me and grins. "In India," he says, "to drive, you need three things: good horn, good brakes, and good patience."

We head toward the main road – of course, here, the main road means anything larger than a path. Swarm drives at a snail's pace. Even the cows are passing us. As we drive along, he begins to point out things. "Hospital," he says. "School. Hindi women. Buffalo. More Hindi women. Goats. Camel."



ROADSIDE SCENERY: On the writer's eight-hour drive through India, she met four sisters. Photo by Margie Goldsmith

As the scenery turns into barren fields, I take a nap. When I wake, it feels as though we're going at least 90 miles per hour, and there's a truck headed right at us.

"Swarm!" I scream, "Look out!"

The truck whizzes by.

Swarm grins through the rearview mirror. "Go to sleep," he says.

But now I can't sleep. I am thinking about the group of men I saw squatting on the sidewalk in Old Delhi with paintbrushes and buckets beside them. I told my guide that day how sad it made me feel to see all these people waiting for work.

This was the same day I bought a tanzanite ring, something I had always wanted to buy but that had always been too expensive for my budget. Here, it was affordable.

When we had left the small jewelry shop and walked through the crowded streets, I felt guilty about buying the ring when all these people around me had nothing. I told the guide that I was thinking about returning it.



The writer also saw sheep and a shepherd crossing the road.
Photo by Margie Goldsmith

"You are helping someone who cut the precious stone," he had said. "It takes two years to make a ring, so you are helping an economy where people are not very rich."

"Do you want to take a photo?" Swarm asks.

In front of us, we see a group of men slamming pickaxes into rocks. Women dressed in neon-colored saris load the heavy rocks into buckets, hoist them on top of their heads, and carry them to a large pile. Swarm stops the car. I jump out, and begin to snap some pictures.

"I'll take a picture of you and them," Swarm offers.

At first, I'm uncomfortable about posing. I feel like a spoiled tourist standing next to the women who are doing this grueling work, but they smile, and motion over to me.

Then, the woman next to me hands me her bucket filled with rocks. It must weigh 30 or 40 pounds, and I can't lift it. The woman laughs, and helps me hoist it – briefly – onto my head. I can't imagine how they carry this weight all day long.

Back in the car we pass a man with a tin container strapped to his bicycle.

"That's a milkman," Swarm says.

As we continue on our journey, Swarm opens up. "All trouble in India," he says. "School is problem. Road is problem. Family is problem. All is problem."

But it's not a problem for me. Especially when we pull up to a little shack just off the road. Four teenage girls rush out and greet Swarm warmly.

"Meet my family," he says. "Take some photos. These are my four sisters, father, and baby."

Then, he points toward the home, where an old woman sits. "This is my mama."

I wave to her, and she smiles. I snap some shots and show them the digital photos.

They don't speak English, but they laugh hysterically at the photos, and shake my hand eagerly. We don't speak the same language, but we have formed an immediate bond.

To me, this is the real India. It's not made up of fancy resorts, temples with endless deities, or the glittering palaces and restored forts. For me, India is full of people, like Swarm's family, who live in the middle of nowhere, have little money, and yet, have just offered me lunch.

Long after I return home, I'll forget the names of the people I met, but I'll remember the openness and warmth of the Indian people like this family and the women with the buckets of rocks. And I'll especially remember drivers like Swarm, who have taught me so much about their country.

What I thought would be the worst day of my trip turned out to be the best.