

4th Indo US-Healthcare Summit and Tour of Rajasthan

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Imagine a journey across an exotic far-flung land the size of Italy, which also happens to be the number one tourist destination in India. Imagine two busload full of family and friends, traveling together, bound in joyous camaraderie, sharing personal and professional information, exchanging ideas, interspersed with merry making, song and “sher-o-shairi” deliveries and serious medical talks. Imagine stopping at a wayside truck stop on a foggy wintry morning and having sweet hot chai in earthenware cups, eating a myriad of local delicacies, staying in hotel palaces considered among the best in the world. Imagine waking to the song of the koyal, coming across a flock of peacocks majestically crossing the road, seeing fortresses rise in the horizon, resonating with tales of chivalry and martyrdom, vast sand dunes, rustic mandana decoration on the huts, elaborately decorated camels, little alleys filled with shops selling handicraft and bejeweled clothes, rubbing shoulders with old royalty and the new powers that be and above all basking in the warm local hospitality of courteous soft-spoken people with an underlying steely resolve and can-do spirit, culminating in the unique Indo-US Healthcare conference presenting cutting edge medical know how for mutual benefit.

Such was the stuff of the recent 4th Annual Indo-US Healthcare Summit preceded by a tour of Rajasthan over Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Merta, Pushkar, Ajmer and Jaipur.

Journey started in Jodhpur with shared tales of woe, of flight disruptions in the wintry weather, lost luggage, planes rerouted, none of which seemed to deter the general excitement and anticipation. Started with a quick transfer from the airport to the Taj Hari Palace Hotel where we met with our traveling companions. Late evening we were able to sneak a taxi ride to some local shops selling exquisite jewelry in some surprising modern and traditional styles, shrunken bandhej sarees and mojri shoes.

Morning dawns and following a sumptuous buffet breakfast we head to the Mehrangarh fort. The palace complex in the fort has breathtakingly carved sandstone filigree work, latticed balconies and jharokas. We get an overview of the blue city of Jodhpur from the fort ramparts, the indigo color being previously used in the white wash of the Brahmin homes to ward off mosquitoes.

Lunch is hosted by none other than Bina Singhvi’s mother in her Haveli. We alight from our buses and are whisked off by a fleet of cycle rickshaws down narrow meandering lanes to the place where Bina spent her summer vacations as a child growing up in Mumbai. We are confronted with a table laid out with shining silver utensils and countless local delicacies. We gorge on a variety of freshly made rotis, pulao, dal bati, ker-sangri, chura and last but not the least a variety of desserts which include the famous local mawe ki kachori and hot amritis and finally with our bellies full we transfer to the bus to Jaisalmer.

We snooze during our travel to Jaisalmer, waking up to the strains of Antakshiri singing at the back of the bus. Despite our heavy lunch we stop at a local dhaba and have an impromptu dinner of hot dal roti and chai.. We rue the dearth of toilet facilities along our major Indian highways –Any entrepreneurs out there? - we reach the palatial Suryagarh Palace hotel in the wee hours of the morning. Prompt, well-organized distribution of rooms, only negative note being a fall sustained on the slippery marble floor in the foyer by our Secretary. No ambulance chasing lawyers here, however. Morning dawns over the Golden City of Jaisalmer to the rising mist and the call of the peacocks.

Jaisalmer is an astonishing city in the middle of the Thar Desert, its sights and sounds overwhelming the senses. It is one of those cities which lives up to one's expectations. Jaisalmer has been a prosperous town since the medieval times, being on the silk route. Much of the town still lives within the Jaisalmer fort which arises like a tawny fairy tale castle from the sand dunes. The walls are made of interlocking blocks of stone with no mortar being used. The temple entrances have the haunting handprints or sati stones of queens who have performed sati. Rajasthani folklore relates that in the hour of the birth the eyes of a boy are set upon a knife and those of a girl upon a lamp- for the man must leave life by way of the sword and woman by that of fire. We see the Jain temples of Rishabhdev and Chandraprabhu that date back to the 12th century with the torana archways and Tirthankara images with glowing jeweled eyes.

We have a fortuitous meeting with the Collector of this area Mr. Giriraj Singh Khushwa, whom the Chief Minister of Rajasthan has informed of our arrival. We slip in a request to go to the Indo-Pak border and he agrees to try provided we submit a formal request to the Superintendent of Police together with our passport information. The articulate Bhim Singh, the Deputy Inspector General of Police gives us a whirlwind trip in his jeep to the Jain temple at Lodruva with its ornate torana and Kalpavriksha. He regales us with local legends and the story of the star-crossed lovers, Prince Mahandru and Princess Moomal .

Luncheon is arranged for us by the locals and AAPI delegates receive large plaques commemorating their visit. Evening we bundle up for a desert safari on camels and are lead to a giant tent settlement and campfire. We see performances by folk singers and dancers, kathputhli handlers and listen to the rustic music of the kalbeliyas.

5.30 next morning we are ready to head to the border outpost. We have a rushed though delicious breakfast of aloo parathas, dosas and some of the best tasting fruit muffins specially prepared for us by the Suryagarh hotel at that early hour. We stop at the border temple of Tanot which was miraculously spared all the bombing during Indo-Pak war with unexploded shells on display.. After about a three hour drive we reach the Prakash Bauliyawala Outpost. We see the electrified fence and the no-man's land and the Pakistani territory beyond. There are elevated look-out at regular intervals. We talk to the lone jawan patrolling. Not much hostilities or insurgencies in this region. Returning we cross the Indira Gandhi Canal and make an impromptu stop at some sand dunes. Eager travelers spill out and climb the almost thirty storey high sand dunes and come sliding

down. In the opposite distance is the village depicted in the movie "Borders." Back in Jaisalmer we visit the Patwon ki Haveli and the Nathmalji ki Haveli, with their exquisitely carved sandstone facades. The former belonged to a wealthy opium and brocade merchant. The latter had the right and left side carved differently by two brothers but still in perfect harmony. Great place to shop for antiques, miniatures and silver jewelry. Bhang is also legally available.

That evening is the 31st of December. There is an educational talk late afternoon followed by karaoke. Surprising number of youngsters demonstrate their proficiency in Bollywood singing and then it is time for the New Year revelry arranged by the hotel, consisting of non stop music dance and dinner. We crash after toasting the New Year and the following morning head back to Jodhpur.

More educational talks in the bus of remarkable depth, a detailed question and answer session en route. We pass Pokhran the site of India's nuclear exercises. Next stop is the fabulous Umaid Bhavan Palace Hotel. This is a truly amazing property. It had the distinction of being one of the largest private residencies in the world built in 1920 to offer employment to the people during a local famine. We are greeted by doormen in full regalia with handle bar and soup strainer moustaches. Inside we are welcomed with garlands and traditional dancers. Under Bina's guidance some of us sneak in some ubiquitous shopping. Prior to our departure we explore the lawns resplendent with bougainvilleas of every color and visit the indoor zodiac pool.

Other delights await us. We are now traveling towards Jaipur, which will be our final destination. Our next stop is Merta the birthplace of Mirabai and the hometown of our own president Dr. Ajeet Singhvi. We listen to the legends of this region, of Rana Pratap and Chetak, of Rani Padmini, of political alliances, Mughal and British influences; we learn about the life of Mirabai and the Bhakti movement and many of our travelers sing the Mirabai bhajans. The whole town of Merta is out there to greet us. Much back slapping and hand shaking as Dr. Singhvi meets old family friends and neighbors from his boyhood and gets the welcome of a returning hero. We visit the temple dedicated to Mirabai and the move on to the City Hall. After some introductory speeches where we are given bags of jeera, which this region is famous for, we are served a traditional banquet. Pretty young girls serve us, speaking fluent English, eyes wide with curiosity, coaxing us to try some more, as do older local gentleman who we are told are agrarian millionaires, notwithstanding their simplicity and humility. Wave goodbyes as we depart and the face of the smiling one-armed beggar lingers in the memory.

The fabled town of Pushkar is next. It is one of the holiest of pilgrimage centers of Hindus and the site of the only Brahma temple. Legend has it that when Brahma was performing a yagna at Pushkar his wife Savitri was absent and as the presence of a wife is essential he entered into a marriage of convenience with a local maiden named Gayatri; whereupon Savitri flew into a rage and cursed Brahma saying that he would not be worshipped anywhere except at Pushkar. A temple dedicated to Savitri has a splendid location on the hilltop. Pushkar is the site of the annual colorful camel fair. We touch the waters of the sacred lake at Pushkar in the memory of our forefathers and proceed to

Ajmer. Few leave the bus for a detailed visit of Dargah Sharif the shrine of the 12th-century Muslim Saint Kwaja Mu'in-ud-din Chisti, perhaps the most important Muslim shrine in India, venerated by Hindus and Muslims alike

We stop at the farmhouse of our own Dr. Didwania, a cardiologist by profession; he has many hectares devoted to the cultivation of exotic fruits. We dine by lantern and candlelight in the dusk. Apparently the sunset viewed from his property is a sight not to be missed. Before we reach the pink city of Jaipur we make another stop at the penthouse residence of Drs. Madnani. In five hours flat they have set up a party that resembles a wedding feast complete with lit festoons, ornate chair covers, tablecloths and place settings. There is a band playing and a local diva singing as waiters bus trays of mouthwatering delights

We finally check into the Rambagh palace annex, few of us going to the Taj Haveli, which was a pig-sticking hunting lodge for the Maharaja, now undergoing renovation. Next morning is the Indo-US Healthcare Summit.

We arrive at The Birla Auditorium. The approach is lined by hundreds of medical students in white. We meet a host of other AAPI delegates who have come for this segment alone. In a flash of paparazzi our chief guest the former President Shri A.P.J. Abdul Kalam arrives. He delivers the inaugural address in his inimitable style. Truly a scientist-statesman and in his eighties a source of inspiration to young and old alike. There is a panel discussion by eminent cardiologist guests from US on issues relating to the high prevalence of heart disease among Indians. We also hear Dr. Samin Sharma speak on the transcutaneous techniques of valve replacements. A bevy of medical students surround him for his autograph. There is an introduction to the different tracks of Asthma and Allergy, Blindness Prevention, Cancer, Diabetes, Lung Health, Organ Transplantation; Innovative Surgical Techniques and Robotics, Maternal and Child Health and last but not the least Medical Tourism. Gala reception dinner and entertainment follows in the Birla Auditorium. AAPI and Indian delegates sway to the seductive music of Gulabo.

Next morning events are held at the SMS center with breakout sessions between the US and Indian teams in the various tracks. Bob Miglani of Pfizer discusses a global survey of physician attitudes and perceptions in 2010. Sadly, US Physicians are way down on the list in career satisfaction as are those from Europe. Physicians in India, Canada, and Brazil are more upbeat and satisfied with their lot. Maharaja Jai Singh who is also involved in the Medical Tourism segment hosts lunch on the Rambagh Palace grounds. He reminisces on his childhood days growing up on this property. We tour the Rambagh Palace and venture into some of the royal suites. We see a lone turbaned attendant beating intermittently on a canvas pennant, his job being to shoo off the pigeons, shades of an era long gone. Evening dinner is hosted at Amer Fort after a sight and sound show narrated by Amitabh Bachchan, courtesy of Mrs. Bina Kak, Ministry of Tourism. The evening is bitterly cold, but we enjoy the hot soups and kebabs. The late evening is spent at the famous Polo Club in the Rambagh Palace, surrounded by old memorabilia, in the

company of a couple of old friends, I finally find Dr. Singhvi relaxed and smiling, over a job well done. We foray into the city under Madhu Aggarwal's guidance and splurge on the local gota-patti design of bandhej sarees with laheriya print and crystal encrustations. The prices give us a bit of sticker shock. Ravi orders a bespoke Jodhpuri suit with the tailor coming to the hotel for fittings. Everything is delivered finished to the hotel.

The last day is wrap up session with each track presenting their outcomes since last year and their goals for the next. Closing remarks are made by the Honorable Governor of Rajasthan and Punjab, Shri Shiv Raj Patil and Rajasthan Health Minister Shri Durru Miyan. We meet with the local press. Tea is served on bone china with the royal crest. To crown it all dinner is hosted at the Polo Grounds where we witness a Polo match . AAPI delegates are invited to the Chief Minister's residence and Governor's Mansion but time is short and we have to head to the airport.

Friends we made too numerous to mention, worthy names have been left out of this travel essay with regret. We leave with musings on the character of the land that has produced the likes of Birla, Bangur, Singhanian, Mittal, Jindal, Ruia, Dalmia, Bajaj to mention a few. What steely resolve made these gentle god-fearing people resist a host of foreign marauders. What has made this state synonymous with gems and jewelry and incredible artwork and textiles. As we head to the ultramodern Jaipur airport the words of a local youngster resounds in our minds "We want to make Jaipur the best and the cleanest city not only in Rajasthan but also in the whole of India."



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