

Pleasant Surprises are the Best

January 31st

There was a little bit of quiet foreboding and reticence about today's planned excursions, rumbling around in the heart this morning. In going to some caves in a National Park on the other side of this huge city, would we get stuck in traffic both going there and coming back? Would it be very hot?... or very crowded? Will this be helpful before the big planned upcoming meditation marathon in Bodhgaya? But we decided to simply trust the good Shivani, if she thinks it's a good place to go and a good thing to do, it probably is. As her mother's place was along the way, and as her mom was keen to see the monks again, we accepted the invitation to have the meal there.

We departed the hotel at 7:15 am. The traffic flowed extremely well all the way along a very long raised freeway. We arrived at Shivani's mother's apartment after about an hour. Dear Kushal, (I've remembered her name now) was very happy to see the monks again. Apparently her daughter in law had made the meal, but she was determined to serve it herself. Special dishes of Punjabi origin were served piping hot. The monks chanted another blessing and then we headed to the Kanheri Caves, contained within the Sanjay Ghandi National Park.

Usually private cars are not allowed inside and visitors need to take the shuttle buses. But Shivani sweet-talked the guard into allowing her driver to usher the visiting monks all the way into the entrance of the caves. He consented! I don't know why I wasn't expecting so much? Perhaps because the fame of Ajanta and Ellora shine so brightly that it kind of eclipses other places? Despite almost expecting to be underwhelmed, within just a couple of minutes we could tell that this was also a very wonderful place. This cave monastery complex was developed over the exact same time period as Ajanta and Ellora. That is to say, for a thousand years from the second century BC.

Two beautifully carved standing Buddhas on either side of the entrance to a large cave containing a Chedi were especially impressive. They stood twenty feet tall and were still in very good condition. The Chedi hall was simple, but also impressive in scale, being twenty metres deep and thirteen metres high. We decided to meditate behind the Chedi in the cool dark for a half an hour. It was so much quieter than Ajanta and Ellora!

The layout of the monastery complex meanders up along a waterfall bed carved in stone. There are many steep steps, which may be why this place is not as popular as the others, but the ever changing broad open vistas is the reward for one's efforts at climbing. Contained within a large National Park, one can see the high rises of Mumbai way off in the distance, yet it seems sooo far away, and the air feels wonderfully fresh and breezy. A young man named Arif, offered to be our guide during the day. He was polite, patient and helpful, taking time to show us all of the highlights and special niches.

Most of the caves here are smaller in scale than at Ajanta and Ellora, but the quality of the stone carving is more intricate and detailed. The smaller size of the caves combined with them being on different levels of the hillside lent a kind of an intimate feeling which was very pleasant. There were many less visitors as well, which made spontaneous practice an

option. We did different pujas and mantras and sat meditation in several different caves as it pleased us throughout the day. Arif said that on weekdays there are usually between 400-600 visitors, 2000 on weekends. Ajanta on the other hand receives ten times as many visitors. These caves receive more visitors during the monsoon months when the stream is flowing.

All in all, meandering up and down the hillside with close spiritual friends, chanting and meditating together. Alternating warm sunshine with time spent sitting in cool and breezy caves, made for a really great day out. We left the National Park at 4 pm, trying to beat the peak hour traffic, and we happily succeeded. We were back tge Sea Green Hotel by 5:30 pm, in time to watch one last sunset over the Arabian Sea. Tomorrow we head off to Delhi to spend one evening with some friends there, and the next day we are headed back to Bodhgaya, life permitting.

Six of the Hotel staff knocked on our door at around 6 pm. They held a bunch of flowers and a bowl of marigold petals in their hands and asked to come inside and pay their respects. The three monks sat in chairs in a row, and each of these sweet people sprinkled some petals on our feet in turn, and then bowed their foreheads gently on our feet, one after the other. This unexpected expression of heartfelt faith and respect was very moving. They did not want tips like the staff in so many other Indian Hotels, but rather, they sincerely hoped we would come back and stay with them again. We chanted a long blessing for them and I sprayed some jasmine and lavender fragranced holy water on their heads. I wished I knew some of their native Marati language, so that I could habe encouraged them in their meditation. I made a note to ensure that we have a translator at hand on our final evening next time, if there may be a next time.