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UNDERWHELMED

Blue Traveler

By **Sandy Asirvatham** | Posted 9/23/1998

I was standing in front of the Taj Mahal--that floating dream, that miracle of filigreed marble, that timeless testament to the power of love--and all I could think was, *What a goddamned waste.*

Yes, of course, my husband and I stood at the edge of the long reflecting pool and had some French people take our snapshot. Yes, my aesthetic sensibilities were all aflutter as I beheld the most beautiful piece of man-made anything I'd ever seen, shimmering and graceful beyond description. In the smoggy midmorning half-light, this 344-year-old wonder of the world rose up starkly against the sky and almost (but not quite) smote from my memory all the poverty, dirt, and human desperation we'd seen during our month-long trip to India.

Our honeymoon, actually.

But alas, the Romance Of It All eluded me. We played the dutiful newlyweds standing arm in arm before that fabulous backdrop, but all I could think about was 17,000 workers, 24 hours a day, for 22 years. That's how the Taj got built, according to a plaque at one of the under-visited side buildings. Round-the-clock labor by thousands of men for nearly a quarter of a century. Why? (Or, as my Indian cousins would put it, "Because why?")

Because there was this king, you see, and he had a beautiful and beloved wife. And this wife died in childbirth, and the king wanted to do right by her exquisite corpse. How very romantic.

But I just couldn't do the math--couldn't see how 17,000 workers plus 22 years of 24/7 can add up to one dead queen.

I said to my husband, "Isn't there something really perverse about all this?"

Thinking back on the awful four-hour taxi trip (no shock absorbers and potholes large enough to cradle sleeping cows) we'd just taken from New Delhi, I said, "Imagine what kind of a road system those workers might have laid down." Thinking back on looking out from the luxury of our hired car at the hundreds--hundreds!--of Indian villagers we'd seen squatting out in their fields to take a morning shit, I said, "Imagine what kind of plumbing and sewage system those workers might have devised!"

Thinking about the many dozens of beggars awaiting us outside the Taj gates, I didn't know what to say anymore.

My husband said, "I think Karl Marx has ruined you for travel."

Maybe my husband was right. In the past few years I'd become weirdly impatient with sightseeing, and the Taj Mahal finally forced me to recognize the root of my discomfort. Simply put, I'm tired of going around the world to gawk at the built-up treasures of the plundering classes. Castles in Denmark, cathedrals in Italy, Rockefeller houses in upstate New York . . . I'm just not interested anymore in seeing the things that enormously rich, powerful people have made with their riches and power.

Ten years ago I saw a traveling exhibition of the treasures of Catherine the Great--all her jewels and statuary and Fabergé eggs and gold-encrusted carriages--and it bored me stiff. No wonder the Bolsheviks decided to revolt.

Even the fine arts have become tainted. At the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, there we all were, hundreds of well-heeled globetrotters lining up to stare at the world-famous images of haystacks, crows, and cramped country bedrooms--images that couldn't attract a single pathetic franc during the artist's lifetime but now fetch many millions of dollars, yen, and Deutsch marks. Today's young, unknown Van Gogh would be trounced out by the museum guard for not having proper footwear.




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I recognize the paradox here: If Van Gogh's paintings have any intrinsic value to humankind, then I suppose it's a good and proper thing that rich people have seen fit to assign them a market value, as well. Otherwise those canvases would have been busted up for kindling and drop-cloths by now. I also know I'm a hypocrite--one of those privileged people who can actually afford to go jetting and taxiing around the world in order to complain about it. The cost of our two coach-class plane tickets to India equaled the annual per-capita income of 11 Indians. Once there we walked around with more rupees in our wallets than even a middle-class Indian family would likely spend in six months.

My similarly well-traveled friends try counseling me with clichés: Places like India (or, with varying degrees of desperation, Denmark, or Italy, or upstate New York, or, well, Baltimore) really need our good solid American tourist dollars.

I can't really buy this argument. I have the feeling that tourism is the most shallow and decadent form of commerce. Sure, it may provide chump change for fast-food workers and bellhops. Ultimately, though, tourism celebrates--rather than questions--a world in which a very few people can have absolutely anything they want, while a whole lot of people bust ass for next to nothing.

Maybe that's the way the world will always be. But even the most beautiful building on the planet can't eclipse that ugly fact for very long.

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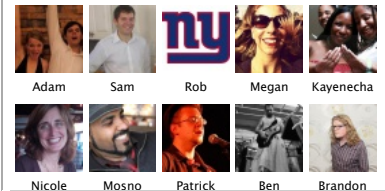
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