



Head Wagging in Delhi: And Other Travel Tales from an Epic Journey Around India

Eytan Uliel

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In this accomplished travel memoir, India beguiles and repels and beguiles again.

Eytan Uliel's *Head Wagging in Delhi: And Other Travel Tales from an Epic Journey Around India* revisits the Australian author's tour through an ever-mystifying, contradictory subcontinent. With humorous candor, Uliel presents episodic memories. From remnants of the Raj in a Darjeeling hotel, to a boat ride on the Ganges, railway ticketing nightmares, and a bit part in a Bollywood film, his encounters highlight an unforgettable reminder: no matter how far from home you go, humans prove more alike than expected.

Covering a four-month-long backpacking trip in the 1990s, each chapter features a different city. Salient impressions and brushes with locals take the stage, allowing Uliel's perceptions of India to collide with reality and to shift over time. Everyday moments take on new meaning against busy backdrops: finding challah in a bakery, watching televised cricket with a group of Indian men, and photographing a man at sunrise all reveal unexpected gifts.

Even disappointments prove illuminating. Udaipur, the site of a classic Bond film, is less alluring when its graffiti-covered palace is seen up close. Global cities, such as Bangalore, seem dull to Uliel and his girlfriend, Camilla, when compared to villages that have retained their essence. At times, the search for a lesser-known, authentic India leads to sharp distinctions between backpackers and regular tourists. The latter are written large, in ways that tread between amusement and derision.

The book is refreshing in its honesty. It paints Uliel as a normal, flawed character who readily acknowledges the privileges of being a traveler while still being upfront about how difficult traveling can be. This is most evident in his near dust-ups with officious people. What Uliel dubs as "Indian logic"—a fastidious indirectness that sticks to bureaucratic rules—yields numerous scenes that are equal parts absurd comedy and embarrassing examples of impatience. And yet, for all the logistical tangles, train delays, illness, and rip-offs by people who overcharge him for services, there's seldom a sense of harshness toward locals or regret. What stands out is an overwhelming eagerness to experience India's breadth.

Sharp, engaging writing, an intelligent balance between grit and splendor, and carefully selected anecdotes bring India's diversity to life. Threaded with fragments of history, the book is informative yet lively, provocative and funny. Without romanticizing the British colonial past or dwelling on poverty and injustice—perhaps clearest in an accidental stumble on a child market in the red light district—the book offers troubling moments, beauty, and wonder in abundance.

In this accomplished travel memoir, India beguiles and repels and beguiles again, resulting in a fascinating journey that is as eye opening as it is dreamlike.

KAREN RIGBY (December 2, 2019)

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