

Travel ★ Longer

YOUR EXTENDED TRAVEL MAGAZINE

Embracing the Cultural Divide

-An Indian Wedding Celebration

'Venice In A Day'
a time-lapse journey

Uncornered Market

"I think the idea is to honor your curiosity and really honor it."

EXCLUSIVE

Ami Vitale

an insatiable desire for storytelling

How To

*Get a Working Holiday Visa for
New Zealand or Australia*

~~editor's~~ note

Billy's



Note - The guy above is not Billy - though for around 3¢ cents, he will make you one mean cup of coffee on the streets of Bangkok!

A few days ago, after sorting through some photos I took on an old trip to Bangkok (see image above), I had a wave of emotion hit me — a wave that motivated me to put pen to paper and write down the following:

I do not need to speak your language to understand your smile.

I do not need to share your religious beliefs to show you respect.

I may not fully understand your past, but I'm sure your future will be bright.

I may not always do things the same way as you, but I know we both only want good things from this life.

We are all privileged to share this beautiful planet - Let us embrace the things that draw us together, rather than focusing on things that make us appear different.

These words later made it on to various social media outlets, and was subsequently spread all over the web. It was received pretty well I guess, as person after person commented on the sentiment behind these words.

Point is, what I love about traveling, is I am constantly challenged to look at things from a different perspective, from a different person's or different cultural point of view.

This 'challenge', when it is embraced, is what helps people grow as individuals. It is also the basis of what is slowly making this world a better place.

We can not dictate where we were born, what views we were raised with, or what preconceived ideas we may have had about certain ideas/people/places — But we can *always* challenge these ideas, educate ourselves, and help other understand that there are far more things that unite humanity, than will ever divide us.

-Billy

"Guests are like Gods"

— included in an Indian wedding in Puri, India

by Lisa Niver Rajna and George Rajna

Being raised in *Los Angeles, California*, I always knew that dreams could come true — at least in the movies. At times I have to pinch myself, realizing that my own personal fairy tale has come true by meeting *George* online, quitting our jobs to travel for a year, and getting engaged underwater. Imagine my surprise to suddenly witness a scene that I thought could only happen on film in the beach town of *Puri, Odisha, in Eastern India*.

This area is known as one of the poorest sections of India with the lowest literacy rates; however, none of that matters during wedding season. No costs are spared during these multi-day extravaganzas. One night, we heard a marching band performing live down below our balcony. Wandering down a side street to investigate, we wondered, "*Is this the Sea Beach festival?*" We were told that there would be classical and folk dancing as well as late night and early morning fire works.

The band carried a large gold banner and wore golden shirts and matching hats rimmed with red decor. Then we saw him, decked out like a *Disney* dream on steroids, a groom resplendent in a white wedding suit perched upon a jeweled white horse. Had we just stepped onto the set of a *Bollywood* film? No, this was reality. The music and the groom perched upon the horse with tears in his eyes were genuine. The groom turned and saw us taking his photo; we said, "*Congratulations!*" and he waved.

The next evening, live music again beckoned and the source of the sound beguiled us. Our explorations brought us to a large group of *Indian* people following a white horse





with the groom whom we had seen the previous evening. Family members explained that the wedding was actually a three-day affair with this being the final evening, the night of the actual marriage.

Priyanka Bhasali (the sister of the groom) greeted, invited and then insisted that we join the party for dinner. In her deep green wedding clothes, she looked stunning. She told us of her dream to become a journalist, a feat I initially figured she would likely achieve due to her poise, intelligence, and superb command of the English language. Her younger brother, *Shubham Bhansali*, along with her cousins, *Kamal Baid* and *Pratik Baid*, answered many of our questions about the wedding ceremony and Indian tradition. They then asked us dozens of their own curious queries. They enquired, “*Where are you from?*” “*California.*”



“*What do you do?*” “*Teacher.*” “*How old are you?*” They asked if our marriage was an arranged or love marriage. We replied that we have a love marriage but since we met online it seems a bit of both worlds in a way.

We were surprised at the rapid-fire questions, which would be considered rude in western cultures. The family was honestly interested in us and could not imagine choosing their life partner or waiting until after forty years of age to do so. Even though we traveled far across the planet to *India*, we appeared like alien beings based on our life choices. I wanted to adopt *Priyanka* after I learned more about her goals, and how her father was standing in her path. After being admitted to journalism school, her life dream, her father informed her that she would not attend the university.

Traveling in *India* was challenging; the smells, sounds, sights assailed our senses and after our arrival the entire globe was waiting to see what would happen to a twenty-three year old woman who was gang-raped, thrown from a bus and later died from her injuries. Unfortunately in India, violence against women has not been taken seriously, called ‘*Eve teasing*’ and generally ignored. It was against this backdrop of protests, news stories and focus on the rights of women that I fervently hoped for another chance for *Priyanka* to make her dreams come true.

Soon after our arrival into the main courtyard, every family member at the wedding knew that two American teachers from *California*, wedded via a love marriage were in attendance at the wedding. Two *French* couples had joined in the night before as including foreign guests in the happy occasion adds to their joy. The family was impressed that we were traveling on our own and not on a group tour. We were impressed with the *mihendi*, red-colored intricate henna designs covering the bridal party’s hands and feet. The groom must search the labyrinth decorations on his new wife’s hands and feet searching for where his initials have been

hidden. This is one of many ways that tradition and custom assist brides and grooms who have never been alone together be more comfortable in their new roles as husband and wife.

Priyanka Bhasali enlightened us about the seventy different food choices at the wedding and traveled around several stations with us to offer local delicacies including tasty treats from *Odisha* to *Punjab*. She also informed us that Indian culture dictates that guests at a wedding should be treated like gods. For this reason, everyone wanted to ensure that we were well fed and enjoying the event. We said to them in Hindi, “*Namaste. Beu die Ho. Danyehvad.*” (Hello. Congratulations. Thank you!)

We met so many aunts, cousins, mothers, sisters, brothers and more cousins. We felt

inappropriately attired in T-shirts, shorts and sandals while the women were wearing elaborate saris with jewels in their ears and on their necks, and even embroidered into the cloth, which was full of gold patterns and vibrant colors. I wanted to run and hide when they insisted on bringing us to the front stage to take photos with the bride and groom in their gleaming white wedding attire. The bride’s dress was nearly completely beaded and weighed twenty kilos according to family members. The bride and groom both looked dashing and in love but I wondered how scared they were to marry near strangers. They had a nine-month engagement in this arranged marriage and after they met kept in touch by phone and Internet. The bride’s family was from *Puri*, the reason it was selected as the location of this multi-day affair.





Priyanka explained several other traditions of her culture and this wedding. We saw the groom and his mother-in-law partaking in the nose pulling ritual. The mother-in-law attempted to pull the groom's nose which he aptly deflected using a handkerchief. Another ritual occurred when the bride and groom exchanged long necklaces of colorful flowers. Afterwards, they were spun round and round with fireworks of flower petals raining down on them. All of these were ways for the two families to knit together and celebrate.

Suddenly, the bride and groom circled each other seven times. I explained to our gracious hosts that we partook in a similar ritual at our Jewish wedding. Who knew that half a world away in different lands, cultures and religions, our traditions could look nearly identical? Later the bride and groom would sit under an isolated yet jeweled umbrella to exchange gifts. This reminded me of how at our wedding we stood beneath a *chuppah* that was a similar to the canopy used by the bride and groom on this night.



During an event full of glimmer and gold (even the horse had been adored with flashing lights), we found a family celebrating in ways that were more similar than different to our own culture. There was food, family, festive attire and a feeling of love. It was our privilege to be included even though they believed the greatest honor was theirs.



After enjoying their hospitality, I searched for a way to return the favor. Several of the younger cousins asked for our emails and Facebook names. I have been communicating online with *Priyanka* and encouraging her to share her stories and her passion for learning about different cultures on our website and in our Travel Writing Contest. Seeing her story live and online on our site might make me feel like a fairy godmother in a true to life movie story. I hope that all her dreams can come true. ★

{ NEXT ISSUE }

TRAVEL WITH KIDS · BLOGGING ADVICE W/ GARY ARNDT · PHOTOGRAPHER DEBORAH SANDIDGE.



Image - Deborah Sandidge

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