



My India: Where every village is home

Story and Photos by Etan Doronne

I visited my friend in his Indian village exactly two years ago, right after Diwali, the Indian New Year. My friend was the only person from this village to have ever traveled and stayed outside the village. He sold embroidery work done by the village women.

I ordered some of the embroidery work so that I could visit this border village. I had to apply for a special permit from the district minister. My friend assured the district minister that I was interested in purchasing embroidery work and so the travel certificate was issued. I was the second foreigner to visit this particular village in recorded history.

This village is on a dead-end road of India, only 7 kilometres from the Pakistani border. I reached

my destination after 90 kilometres and a three-hour drive from Barmer, which, as a district center, is only a small town.

When I reached this village, I felt I had arrived at a tribal village: Dunes of sand all around with low bush vegetation and cone dome huts built of mud and bush branches.

Among these huts that are scattered around and fenced with decorative mud walls or just dry bush branches woven together, there are wide sandy paths that are often spotted with goats or a camel cart delivering water.

In this village, there is only one shop. It is a general store in the style of Indian roadside stalls: A wooden box on pillars that has a front flap that

opens like a kiosk. In this shop lies the one and only phone in the village (and surrounding area).

No coverage for cell phone, no television, no newspaper and most of all, no electricity. No marriages on the streets or fireworks, such as is the daily routine of most cities and towns in India, no motor vehicles—so no noise, pollution or traffic jams.

But there's a lot of nature and good-natured people. India's treasure is its culture and it shines through its people. The simple daily life of rural villages and towns reveals this reality.

All vegetables are grown locally and are fresh as could be. I tasted the Kachra Sabji, which is a stir-fried wild vegetable. It was my first time and it was really good with Sogra, which is a millet Chapati.



Etan Doronne uses a water bucket that was stitched by hand out of old tires.



At night I asked if I could taste the locally made drink. It was smooth and tasty, considering the high percentage of alcohol present in locally made drinks in India.

That drink came along with Namkin, the salty snacks that go well with alcohol. In this village these are made of lightly fried Guarfali, a wild tree with thin bean-like fruit. Another snack, the Tarbuj (watermelon) baked seeds was excellent.

Life in the village challenged many of my old concepts. For example, a visit to the bathroom. First, you have to stop at the roadside kiosk and take one of the common empty beer bottles that are kept by the tree just for that reason. You fill the bottle with water and head out to find a nice spot for yourself. You have to walk along the road past the village limit. Since the bushes are thin and short and cannot hide you, you'll continue walking out to the sand for another 300 feet or so—until you're too small to be noticed by pedestrians on the road. This is just one example of life in a rural Indian village that challenges our Western standards.

Many traditional environmentally friendly and recycled items can be seen. For example, the bucket used for withdrawal of water from the underground tanks are stitched by hand out of old tires.

Rugs are made by hand loom in three or four thread shades that are all natural: black and brown are of goat hair, white is cotton and blond is of camel hair.

In this village, it is said, people enjoy long lives. One 95-year-old person I met was not only walking and functioning, but still smoking the locally made biddies, which are thin cigarettes made of dried tobacco leaves held together by a colorful thread of cotton.

The sitting on the floor for dining and navigating the "toilet" seem to stretch the muscles, joints and ligaments numerous times a day and are built-into-life fitness exercises.

When traveling in India, merging into the Indian tempo is key. Otherwise, one is likely to grow frustrated: Looking at their minimal ways of living in poverty, considering their flexible schedules as incompetence or relating to the natural living as primitive. To really experience the Indian "Shanti," the liberation of enjoying the moment, one has to stop racing for the next.

On Feb. 7, 2007, Etan Doronne began a year-long solitary backpack journey through rural India. Some of the villages he visited had never had a foreign visitor, let alone an opportunity to build a friendship with one. Today, he shares this life-changing experience in presentations and Indian cooking workshops at public venues and homes across the United States. He also guides small group tours to rural villages in India. For more information, visit www.myindiaexperience.com or call him 818-401-5546.