

Day 33 - 8th Dec. 2009 Jabalpur

Jabalpur! Why would you want to go there? That was the cry from many an Indian who asked us where we are going on the rest of our tour after Rajasthan. The first reason was a personal one - to meet Vishal our travel agent who helped us to organise this great trip to India. We've been emailing each other for two and a half years and were looking forward to finally meeting him. And what a delightful person he is, just as we expected from reading between the lines of his website and emails.

And the second reason for travelling to Jabalpur? It was the starting point for our visit to two of India's major tiger survival projects in National Parks.

So we flew from New Delhi to Jabalpur via Gwalior in a 50+ seater aircraft. We took off on time in the wee small dark hours of the morning and headed for Gwalior, our first stop, about an hour away. As we neared that city the captain announced over the intercom that Gwalior was fog-bound (or, in reality, smog bound) with visibility at less than half what was a safe landing standard. We circled for a little while before he decided to head for Bhopal. Why, we mused, when we were supposed to be going to Jabalpur? We refuelled whilst at Bhopal, sat around for a bit on the runway in the hope the fog would clear back in Gwalior. It didn't. We took off for Jabalpur at last. On arrival at the tiny airport we realised why we had gone via Bhopal. There's hardly a trolley, let alone refuelling facilities in Jabalpur.

Jabalpur is the capital of Madhya Pradesh state, the second largest state in India. Our first reaction was to delight in the colour green! It was so pleasing to the eye. The country around the city is so much greener than the desert state of Rajasthan - I guess you'd expect as much! But the greenness of the place was in such sharp contrast to the last four and a half weeks that it seemed SO green, and with such dense undergrowth.

Even though we were over two hours late arriving in Jabalpur, Vishal was there waiting to greet us - full of a thousand smiles and hugs of welcome. We drove the 25 minutes into the town passing the university. It's quite a busy city being a large military town as well as the junction of three railway lines.

Vishal dropped us off at our hotel for a freshen up and something to eat. We found ourselves sharing a post wedding group's morning-after-the-event breakfast. It seems that we had gone to the wrong eating place but it didn't seem to matter much as there were only a few late comers present. We weren't even charged for the few sandwiches and tea that we had.

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Vishal returned 90 minutes later to take us to the river for a boat ride through a marble canyon. We were rowed by two young fellows for something like two kilometres up the river to a set of rapids - a very pleasant, scenic ride and it was really nice to be out on some water.



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This canyon is one that Bollywood has used for a number of movies. There's even the romantic story about a patch of pink marble being pink because the actress was wearing a pink sari when sitting on the rock for one of the takes! They were there for six days for five minutes of movie. We had but an hour for David to catch the essence of this place, but then we didn't have actresses in pink saris and large egos to contend with!



We saw some wonderful kingfishers on the banks. A few young boys took death defying leaps from a high cliff into the river if you paid them R10 (AUD 25 cents). Quite a sight and far braver than I ever was or could be.

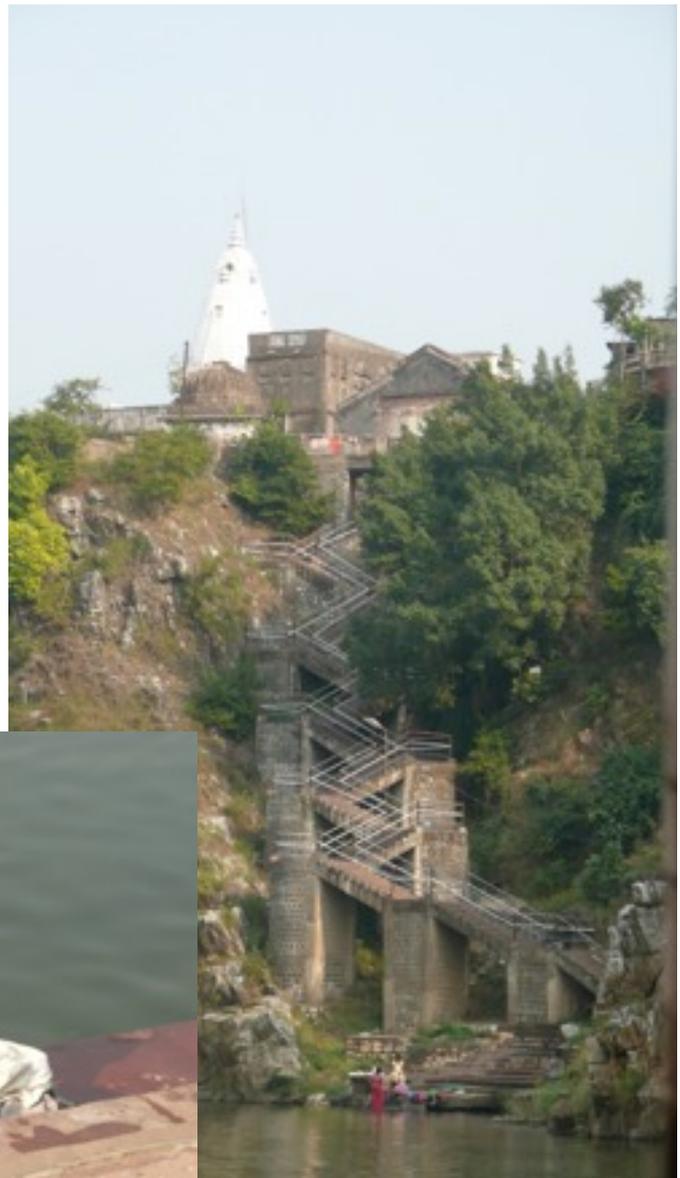


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How lucky were we - just three passengers in our boat. And how lucky were our rowers? Most boats were full to overflowing and must be quite heavy to row.

And how lucky were we that our hotel wasn't the one at the top of these steps! And the women at the bottom are doing their washing in the river. That's quite some climb down and up to do the washing! No washing machines here.



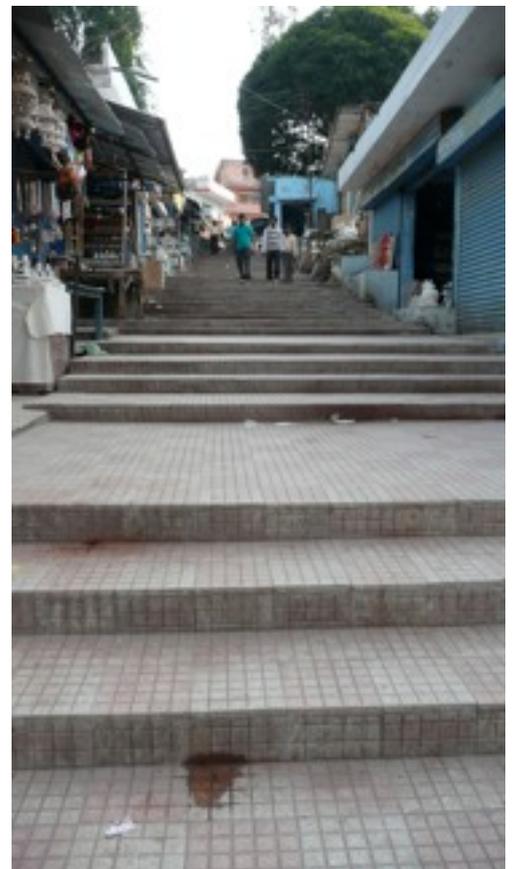
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When we returned to the staging point there was much activity; people were bathing, having their heads shaved or washing clothes. The river was the cleanest we've seen so far in India and flowing quite fast. This river supplies much of the fish eaten in the area - quite large fish too.



And then there were the steps! A hundred or so of them from the boat ramp to the town at the top through a myriad of shops and stalls. Many of them were trying to sell soapstone crafts. Yes it was indeed quite a climb up not one but two sets of stairs... but lots to see on the way!



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From here we drove a little further upstream to the starting point for a walk to a higher set of rapids. But first more craft stalls to pass on the way - lots more!

Some women were selling bright coloured powders that many women use as their 'tika' spots. They also use it in the parting of their hair to indicate that they are married. Most use red.



Colourful saris added extra brightness to the scene as it always does in India.



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The walk was well worth while as we came to a place where the river begins its fall over waterfalls and rapids. Our boat ride had taken us almost to the bottom of these falls. It must be an amazing sight in the monsoon season. And they asked us why we were going to Jabalpur? Silly question really.



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Near the top of the falls was a quiet pool area just right for dabbling the feet in cool water on a very hot afternoon. No I didn't try it but it looked so good.

And then a great day was made even more perfect by spending an evening with Vishal and his lovely wife Ruchi and there extended family - daughter, Mum and Dad, brother, sister-in-law, nephew, cousin and a friend or two. India really is a country that places family ties and values first and foremost. It was so good to meet them all and be so welcomed into their home. I'll add Vishal's contacts below. We can really recommend him to any one, who wants to explore any part of India.

Love from us both Jennie and David

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