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CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

The *CultureShock!* series is a dynamic and indispensable range of guides for those travellers who are looking to truly understand the countries they are visiting. Each title explains the customs, traditions, social and business etiquette in a lively and informative style.

CultureShock! authors, all of whom have experienced the joys and pitfalls of cultural adaptation, are ideally placed to provide warm and informative advice to those who seek to integrate seamlessly into diverse cultures.

Each *CultureShock!* book contains:

- insights into local culture and traditions
- advice on adapting into the local environment
- linguistic help, and most importantly
- how to get the most out of your travel experience

CultureShock! India helps you understand this vast country that has more than 4,000 separate communities and where over 300 different languages are spoken. Learn to navigate your way through Indian society, and appreciate the traditions and values that bind the people together despite their differences. Peppered with personal anecdotes, this book gives practical advice to avoid cultural misunderstandings as well as tips to facilitate your move to the country, including information on how to find a suitable home, how to get around, what schools and facilities are available for your family, and what to expect from the work environment. Complete with delightful chapters on food, entertaining, leisure activities and festivals.

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INDIA

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CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

INDIA

Lynelle Seow



For Review only

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INDIA

Lynelle Seow

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Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, the authors share all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and cover a range of topics that will arm readers with enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people—where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book.

Then on with the practical aspects—how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For Review only

DEDICATION

I owe a debt of gratitude to Mr and Mrs Dayal for opening their home to us and providing a nurturing environment from which we could best explore India. I benefitted greatly from their insights and invaluable feedback.

I would have never thought of putting my thoughts on paper if not for the nudging of friends, who I must thank for believing in me when the nights were long and resolve was short: Ee Huang, Patricia, Priyanka, Tammy and Yumi. Thanks must also go to Amita and friends in Delhi, Mumbai and Singapore who lent their experiences and friendship. Huge thanks go to my editors Rachel Heng and She-Reen Wong for their patience and professionalism, and to my family for accommodating my strange writing hours and creative moods. Also not forgetting “Chindians” Andrew and Devi, as well as Murugan and Dhurga, for help with the Tamil phrases. Thanks must also go to my new colleagues for their support and love.

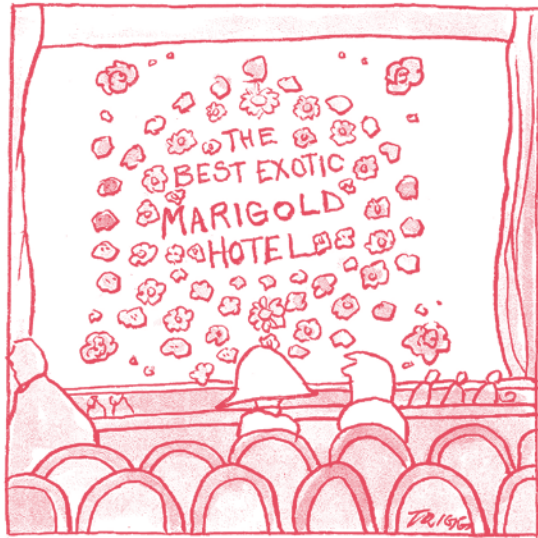
Lastly I have to mention three people to whom I owe a deep personal debt. I am grateful to Melvin for his kindness and encouragement, and to my best friend Shah, whose unwavering encouragement and friendship have been invaluable to the completion of this book. I am especially grateful to my husband Ben, who has held my hand for 15 years and made me smile for just as long. Ben has been my sunshine and my rock, and this book is my love song to him and a story of us.

*For Ben and our “Indian family” —
the Dayals, Madhu and Santosh*

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I sat pondering in my seat as the lights came on and the credits rolled. I had just watched *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, a story about seven people who had left the life they had always known in order to continue it in India. As the movie-goers around me walked away from the fiction back to their comfortable lives, I lingered amid the discomfort of what my life may soon become.

My husband Ben had received word that his job would bring us to New Delhi and we had just enough time to let it sink in and watch a movie, the latter being my only effort at cultural preparation (I'm glad you're doing more, such as reading this book). As fear-driven well-wishers plied me with an immodest supply of medicines and packaged food to stave off death by diarrhoea, I knew I had to adopt a better

mental model than doom. Death by close-mindedness would be far more tragic. So I changed my starting point from dread and fear (although caution is useful) and decided my time in India would be "not merely to survive, but to thrive", in the words of Maya Angelou. And to do so "with some passion, some compassion, some humour, and some style".

I believe that this is the perfect mantra for anyone embarking on their personal passage to India; not merely to survive but to thrive. Only then can you get the best out of your Indian experience with all its exotic and marigold-fringed possibilities.

It is not difficult at all to see why "Incredible India" was adopted as the slogan for the country that lies beyond the edge of singular description. Nowhere on earth is there a country older, more colourful, more intriguing, more exasperating than India, this grand old dame with a million facets and a billion characters who has seen the tide of times. Having given birth to four world religions and the oldest living civilisation, she now nurtures the world's largest democracy whilst keeping to age-old traditions in an unparalleled example of cultural continuity. Nowhere else can the past and present intertwine like it can in India. She robes herself with complexity and contradictions and wears diversity like a crown. To understand her is to have to piece together a multitude of encounters, views, odes, rants, experiences, fables and stories. This book shares mine.

MAP OF INDIA

For Review only

A NOTE TO THE READER



I have tried my best to provide a pan-India perspective but my account comes mainly from my experiences living in New Delhi and Mumbai, and my travels to other Indian cities, such as Amritsar, Bengaluru, Chennai, Jaipur, Hyderabad, Kolkata and Visakhapatnam.

Where generalisations are made, I have tried my best from falling into stereotypes. India is a diverse culture so if I have inadvertently crossed that line and offended anyone, I apologise in advance.

Some terms used in the book are colloquial usage, such as the word “servant” rather than “hired help”, “domestic staff” or “housekeeper”.

The spellings of Hindi words may differ since there isn’t any standard Romanised Hindi spelling. New Delhi and Delhi are also not synonymous, as commonly thought. The country’s capital of New Delhi is a district in the city and union territory of Delhi. As for other Indian cities, I have used the most recent names: Mumbai (previously Bombay), Chennai (Madras), Bengaluru (Bangalore) and Kolkata (Calcutta).

And lastly, a personal wish:

Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr once said, “A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.” I left India with a broader understanding of the world and a keener sense of humanity. May it be the same for you.

CHAPTER 1

FIRST IMPRESSIONS



“A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.”

—Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr

Our destiny with India began as early as 2001 when we were invited by Ben’s colleague Shridar to witness his nuptials in his hometown of Vijayawada. With little more than a backpack, youth and naivety, we plunged into India’s deep south for a two-week-long lesson in the world at large. I remember emerging from the airport to a swarm of flies and a blur of people in numbers I had not seen before, shouting for my attention above the din of blaring horns and the *put-put-puts* of engines. It was all too much to take in and 14 days later we returned home a little older, thinner (I had food poisoning) and wiser, never expecting that within a decade, we would return once more for another shot at wonder.

In 2009, love brought me back to India. Ben had taken a job in Mumbai whilst I was finishing up my work contract in Manila. I remember emerging from the airport to a swarm of flies and a blur of people... it was the same story but a different self. I was older, more seasoned and yet, despite all I had come to expect, Mumbai served up more permutations of the unexpected. I returned to Manila a little older, fatter (with *tandoori* chicken) and wiser, never dreaming that just three years later we would return yet again—this time to call India home together.

We arrived in Delhi on a crisp November morning to the same blur of people in numbers I *had* seen before and a chilly climate I had not. I will not merely survive but thrive, I thought as an elephant lumbered past our car window. It was a fitting



Overtaking expectations; expect the largely unexpected in India.

beginning that reminded me that no matter how many times I visit India, it remains nothing short of incredible.

On our second day in Delhi, Ben tasked me to go house-hunting whilst he went to work. A few hours into the hunt with what looked like a haunted house and nothing else suitable in sight, my real-estate agent received a text that one house had just come onto the market that very afternoon and we were five minutes from it. The tall metal gate opened up into a neat 1970s double-storey white bungalow with a large garden in which two people sat drinking their afternoon tea. Fate smiled. We smiled. And our kismet found each other. This was my first introduction to the Dayals. Over the course of time, the shared house became a home of shared lives and a sun-filled window into India.

In the next two months Madhu joined us to help me wage the daily battle against dirt, dust and greasy pots and pans. Hailing from the tea estates of Darjeeling, she had the strength of two men and the stamina of 10 so I eventually sat down

and let her do the heavy lifting. She swept me off my feet with her common sense and gradually her gentle affection as we grew closer over gossip and grime.

A few months later Santosh joined us as our driver. He came to the interview with a limp from a motorcycle accident a few months before and spoke only a smattering of English, a result of a simple childhood in his village in Nepal and a life unkind. He had moved to Delhi with his mother, brother and wife in search of new beginnings after being abandoned by his father. It could have hardened him, but it made him tender and kind, dependable and loyal to those he cared about. We had all needed each other in some way, initially because of shelter and service and then eventually for comfort and support, which gradually grew over tea and *pakoras* (fritters) into kinship and love. Unexpectedly, India made us a family. Such is her creative spirit in bringing together the unlikely and the improbable.



But I have skipped too quickly to the end. The journey in between is the story, the rocky road of tears and triumphs to which I can only help to provide a crude map to make it a little easier. You will have to forge your own way, whether it's down the well-trodden path or off the beaten track, and determine who and what lies at the end of the road. But first, let's go to the very real frustrating starting point of your journey: culture shock.

CULTURE SHOCK

Settling into a new country is like getting a new pair of shoes. At first, they will cut and bite, and it becomes tempting to rage and cast them angrily aside. But with perseverance you learn to adjust, and with time the shoes become more and more comfortable. You may even like them more than you care to admit. Similarly it is with India. In the beginning, India can seem like a sustained assault to your senses and sensibilities. Nothing is moderate; everything is extreme.

Here are the most common cuts and bites that can wear down even the most prepared.

- **Crowds:** A country with 1.2 billion people is bound to be crowded, but crowds in India also have a tendency to congregate, making the human crush feel much worse.
- **Noise:** White noise in India is chaos and cacophony anywhere else. The everyday onslaught of honks, bells, traffic, and voices blaring in the background, only begins to dull when you learn to turn a deaf ear.
- **Smells:** Spicy curry and incense blended with pungent notes of urine, garbage, sweat and occasionally sewage creates India's most common street scent—Eau d'our. It never fades.

- **Filth:** Overflowing garbage points, litter, clogged drains, spit and urine on Indian streets are overwhelming until they become normal, indicating that you have reached a new threshold.
- **Heat:** This is not the warmth of a sunny day; this is the near burst of the thermometer. Burning, sweltering, oppressive, sticky heat also cruelly intensifies Eau d'our. There is nothing more you can do but cope or escape.
- **Too much attention:** Everybody wants to help you or get you to buy their wares, ride their autos, donate your spare change. "Madam, madam, madam, sir, sir, sir" will be incessant until you get too tired to respond further and coldly walk away. Don't judge me, it can happen.
- **Contrasts:** Rich and poor, old and new, clean and dirty, have and have-nots; the pile-up of paradoxical pairs will be as unimaginable as they are mind-numbing and gut-wrenching. Manage your emotions well.
- **Life:** Nothing will go perfectly the way you planned or in the time you think it will take. It is best to know it now.

It is important to give yourself time to get used to it all. Some say it takes a year to come to some sort of acceptance. To shorten this time, don't fight what you cannot change but do your best to improve what you can. For many, hopes do gradually fade and preconceptions adjust. India is a process. The best way to handle culture shock is to tell yourself that things are not wrong, just different. In the movie *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, Sonny Kapoor gives the best advice on how to handle the frustrations of culture shock: "Everything will be all right in the end, so if it's not all right, then it's not yet the end." It's not the end.



Eventually, you will reach the end in shoes well worn by the journey. You might not have found the comforts of your homeland in India, but the end of the road could yield something much more valuable—yourself.

There is some truth in the popular idea that people go to India to find themselves. But personal enlightenment comes not only through meditation in the mountains or other exotic spiritual experiences. It also comes when the environment forces you to face yourself, when it holds up a mirror and reveals your biases and attitudes, and the way you react to challenges. Some change. Others harden and grow cynical. The discovery of India is as much a discovery of yourself. So choose to let India hone a better version of yourself. Novelist Margaret Atwood says: "In the end, we all become stories." What will yours be?

For Review only

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lynelle Seow is convinced that she must have been Indian in her previous life, given her interest in all things Indian. In this life, she is a Singaporean who has dreams of being a Bollywood dancer despite the reality of two left feet and an incredible lack of coordination. She holds a Master of Architecture, but prefers to build castles in the air and bridges to other cultures. She has lived and worked in Singapore, the United States, the Philippines and India as various avatars: architect, editor, branding-marketing professional, and volunteer English teacher. She is married to Benjamin Yap and they have eight plants together. She lived in India for what seemed to be a short lifetime and currently resides in Singapore.