Writing down my thoughts isn't easy this time, because the experience of traveling the country where I am now is hard to put into words. This country is so unique and dynamic, it leaves me surprised and overwhelmed time after time. Just when I think I have it all figured out, something happens that proves the opposite. And that's exactly what makes traveling here so amazing: it's truly an experience. The best way to explain it might be to compare it with a roller coaster ride: you get in, you buckle up, and you take off – and from that moment on the best thing you can do is to just give into it and enjoy the ride! It's intense, but that's also the beauty of it, and if you can appreciate that, you're guaranteed to have an incredible experience that you won't forget anytime soon… Where I am? In India of course! ☺

I have to admit I wasn't this enthusiastic when I just arrived: it took me some time to get into it. Although I have quite a lot of travel experience by now, nothing can really prepare you for India, because it's just completely different than any other country. And it's heavy. The colors, the smells, the tastes, the sound – everything. And it's crowded. And chaotic. And loud. And polluted. It's a shock to your system, both mentally and physically. The big cities are especially hectic, so when you arrive in Delhi (like me), you get to dive right into it. To be honest, I was happy to leave the city after a couple of days. But after that, things only got better, and the longer I'm in India, the more I'm enjoying it and the more it's getting under my skin. You get to experience things here that you don't get to experience anywhere else. This is the country where you walk into a temple and a holy 'baba' invites you to smoke a 'chillum' with him. The country where the most colorful and extravagant parades pass you by on the street on a daily basis. The country where you witness people perform bathing rituals in holy water to cleanse their karma. The country where you see bodies burning along the Ganges river. The country where you're always at risk of crashing into a cow (or stepping into a pile of cow dung). The country with countless small alleyways to get lost in endlessly, and small shops that are almost literally a hole in the wall. The country where the traffic doesn't seem to obey any rules and cars and bikes honk so loud it hurts. Where an overcrowded bus will always fit some more people. And where nobody blinks an eye when a train has an eight-hour delay. Ultimately, that's the only way, because when you get worked up over things like that, you'll get frustrated within no-time. Traveling in India takes a lot of patience and energy, but in the end everything always works out. It's all part of the India-experience, and although it drives you crazy sometimes, it might not be such an adventure if everything just went down smoothly.

India has a unique culture and the rhythm of life is completely different from Western and even South-East Asian countries. It's a traditional country that values ancient customs and rituals, and this is often beautiful to witness. Traditional clothes are still being worn by many people: in Rajasthan you encounter many men dressed in white longyi's and tunics and wearing turbans;

women wear colorful sari's and stunning jewelry. Traditional dance and music are still popular and religious ceremonies very important. Everywhere you go you encounter temples and altars, where elaborate or modest rituals are being performed. Weddings are spectacular, and feature a groom riding a horse down the streets, accompanied by extremely loud music and an abundance of shiny and fluorescent decorations. In short, it's a feast for the eyes. But, there's also a downside. For one, India still has a caste system. It's not the poorest country I have visited so far, but it is the country where I've seen the most severe poverty. This means there's a big gap between the rich and the poor, and a lot of people don't profit from the country's wealth at all. There are many beggars and people living on the streets in improvised tents, that can't count on any support whatsoever. In this regard it's an extremely tough society. Moreover, the position of women can be considered problematic. In general, Indian society is dominated by men and women tend to have an inferior position. One of the ways you notice this, is that the streets and public places are predominantly inhabited by men and relatively few women. When I stayed in family guesthouses women were often at home all day, taking care of the household, and in small traditional villages I sometimes saw that boys would go to school, but girls wouldn't. I'm sure there are also examples of more modern families where women have a better position, but these situations are definitely no exceptions. At one point I visited a restaurant run by female victims of acid-attacks: the violence is typically perpetrated by men, and this phenomenon has been on the rise in recent years.

All in all one can say India is not exactly a women-friendly country, and this obviously has consequences for women traveling the country. Beforehand many people warned or discouraged me to travel to India alone, and I was prepared for the worst, but in my experience it is not as bad as many people would like you to believe. So far I haven't had any incidents or felt unsafe. That being said, I do take more precautions than in other countries. I dress conservatively, I try to travel by daylight and avoid going out at night alone, and I deliberately keep some distance from local men. As a Western woman you're guaranteed to get a lot of attention: it regularly happens you're being stared at shamelessly, many people and mostly men want to take pictures with you, and at one point I even had a complete train compartment gathering around me to chat. Sometimes this is just genuine and friendly interest, but sometimes it's also the result of men trying their luck because they think you might be an easy catch. And they can indeed be pushy, so you have to be pretty assertive. By now I have become pretty good at ignoring people or simply replying with a blunt 'no'. What also helps, is that there are almost always people around, so there's the option of raising your voice to attract attention or ask for help should that be necessary. Based on my personal experience, I think it's perfectly doable to travel in India as a woman alone, as long as you are careful and assertive.

On another note, it's not just women that get a lot of attention in India: basically all foreigners do. Every country I've visited so far has some scams going on, but India without a doubt tops them all. Walking the streets you get approached by salesmen non-stop and there's a good deal of cheaters among them. So, anybody traveling India has to be on guard and street savvy. And although you have to use your intuition anywhere in the world, this is extra important here. Moreover, the country has a high number of inhabitants per square meter, and people are used to not having a lot of personal space. What we might consider an invasion of our privacy, is not necessarily perceived as such here. Add all this up – and you'll start to understand that a day in India can be pretty intense. However, I should also emphasize that I met loads of sweet, helpful and hospitable people. I've been invite to a chai and a chat, to weddings, and to people's homes numerous times, and many people love to help and host foreigners. The fact is, in a country as big as this, you're going to encounter all kinds of persons. People here like to say: a hand has five fingers, and they're not all the same. And that's just right. If I would have to characterize Indian people in general though, I would mainly describe them as passionate, extravert, outgoing, playful, and humorous. They live their lives with dedication and love company, talking, parties, music, and dancing. They often don't take things too seriously and many issues can be solved with a joke or a laugh. Once you've figured that out, you can actually have a lot of fun with them.

Now, this has already become a long story and I haven't even described where I've been yet, so I'll just give a global overview of my whereabouts. After my arrival in Delhi, I traveled around Rajasthan for a few weeks, which is a great place for lovers of culture, history and architecture. It has loads of impressive historic buildings, such as forts and palaces, and picturesque old city centers. This region has a distinct culture, and its traditions are still very much alive today. The natural environment is desert-like, beautiful and inspiring. I got to spend a night in the desert, sleeping under the open sky and thousands of bright stars: a magical experience. After this I went to India's most famous building: the Taj Mahal. It's obviously a very popular and touristy place, but righteously so: it's a true beauty and a must-see when visiting India. Then I traveled to Khajuraho, famous for its temples with erotic sculptures (hence the nickname 'Kama Sutra temples'). Those were... uhm, interesting! But all jokes aside, the erotic sculptures are actually just a small part of the artwork, and the rest of the sculptures are also pretty impressive. From here I went to Varanasi, where I still am at the time of writing.

Varanasi is a holy city, located on the Ganges river, and the story goes it's one of the oldest inhabited cities in the history of mankind. People from all over India flock here, on religious and spiritual quests. There are many 'sadhus', that have given up all their earthly possessions to devote themselves to spirituality, and are literally living on the stairs of the 'ghats'.They look impressive, often wearing orange robes and sometimes smearing their faces with ash or paint.

Every day fire ceremonies take place at sunrise and sunset. The ritual consists of 'pandits' simultaneously waving oil lamps and other attributes, while 'chants' are being sung. Family members carry their deceased beloved ones through Varanasi's alleys to the river Ganges, to cremate them on the riverbank. The ash and bones are thrown into the river, because this is said to free the soul from the cycle of rebirth. This may seem unpleasant to witness, but in fact that's not how I experienced it. I found the 'burning ghats' to be surprisingly calm, and the whole process somehow felt quite natural. People seem to accept that life and death are inseparable and everyone dies one day. Watching all these rituals, that have been performed for centuries, makes you realize we're all a small and temporary part of something bigger. It makes you feel humble and at the same time appreciate the value of life. Varanasi is a magical place, where spirituality is very close, and sitting beside the Ganges, you feel a strong and unique energy. Being here is an intense experience, but at the same time it's not as heavy as it might seem. The atmosphere in Varanasi, despite everything that's going on, is beautiful and peaceful, and I feel good in this place. The spiritual and the holy goes hand in hand with the ordinary and the mundane. At the riverbank you see kids playing cricket and people washing clothes, like anywhere else. In the 'burning ghats' cows walk through the ashes, eating flowers and not having a care in the world. And 'sadhus' don't mind chatting with tourists – one of them even showed me a funny face. It may seem contradictory, but it's liberating at the same time, and maybe this is symbolical for India: the country where anything is possible.

In a few days the Holi festival will take place, which I'll celebrate in Varanasi, and after that my visa will expire and I'll go to Nepal. I don't have to say goodbye to India yet though, since I have a double-entry visa, that I can use to come back after I've been to Nepal. And I'm happy about that – because I'm definitely not done yet!