

the town. A few men came from an alleyway carrying a bag of lime, which had slightly split, covering one's face and torso. After saying good morning in my basic, broken Hindi, they invited me back to their place. So into the ghettos we go. After fending off stray dogs and monkeys, fording strange twisted roads, we had arrived at a small hut next to a shrine. Just a small concrete cube, with a pile of bedding in the corner, Who knows how many of them slept there, as there were relatives everywhere, coming and going.

So after half the slum came out to see what a white guy was doing on their turf, a million hand shakings, chai teas, name forgettings and a thousand smiling new friends, four of the males plus me, went inside the hut, where they plied me with bedies (Indian cigarette, tobacco rolled in betel leaf then left to dry) and white home distilled whisky stored inside a grocery bag. So we sat, talked, drank this potent brew which could have been distilled aviation gas and looked through the handful of photos they had. Photography was a national treasure, and photographs were whipped out with zeal at most occasions, including the usual 1000 photographs of a relative's nine day wedding ceremony. But this guy's photos were different, they were a tale of tough times. He told me of his uncle and best friend dying from the brown sugar, he too had almost died and showed me the photo of him collapsed next to a mud hut. Other photos included a series of his father crawling around in the dust due to drunkenness, and told me he too had problems with the brown sugar until his death, yet assured me he had kicked the sugar. I learnt much later that brown sugar was heroin.

Outside our second room (the first one flooded, and was subsequently let out as an impromptu brothel) was the balcony terrace, which looked over the desert. It was great to just sit in the sun watching the desert life go by, people in the slums and sadhu camps defecating behind the scrappy desert shrubbery. The occasional cow, camel or brass band, and the palest sky I've ever seen. To the left of the view was a mountain which I swore everyday I'd climb. It seemed a test, once I had the motivation and itch to climb that mountain I could leave Pushkar. Every day I would stare at that mountain with Adir, an Israeli just fresh from combat duty in Lebanon. Unlike me he had a Royal Enfield Thunderbolt, which permitted him to leave at any given time, without the ordeal of public transport. The only factor tying him to any one place for any length of time was his travelling companion, an amoeba that he'd caught in Goa which flared up on occasion.

But he understood what the mountain represented. All the vagabonds I met were either running from something or searching for something. My morning chai man would ask me "Why travel? If you have family, friends, wife. Happiness should be within this."

It was true. Indians have a great sense of community. They scrap and fight, but love each other deeply at the same time. They are all proud patriots of India. And that sense of community is something I felt was missing. The many paradoxes of India, a swarming strange force that pulled and tugged you in all the disparate directions. It was easy to feel helpless and alien, a singular cell observing a well oiled machine in motion.

But if India challenged your perceptions and made you feel the odd one out it was the Holi festival that made everybody One. There was big hype around the Holi festival. Holi Mania. Paint and water dispersing weapons were sold in every shop, as well as high powered explosives. In efforts to diversify, even the samosa man was selling fireworks.

The morning of Holi I woke for my morning walk, was



immediately covered head to toe with water and paint by the next door neighbours' kids, then proceeded to walk through town, being the prime target for all the shop keepers I'd come to know.

Upon returning home I was absolutely covered in thick layers of paint, a thick purple and green crust.

After dragging everyone out of bed we headed down to the city square, getting mobbed by kids with water pistols and mischievous shop owners with bags of paint. Luckily we had bought a stash of paint and could defend ourselves. That is until we reached the town square, which was covered in a constant cloud of multi-colored dust.

Some heavy trance techno was playing though the DJ was in hiding lest he be paint bombed. Some tourists were taking photos, while trying to claim immunity due to their cameras "don't throw paint, I've got a camera." Too late.

The swirling cloud of paint dust, covering every surface while people danced in wildly induced trances. A strange psychedelic party, at 11pm. Only this weird debauchery wasn't drug induced or alcohol dependent, it was straight from a dream.

Hence my conclusion, India is a drug.

After swearing I'd never go back, after losing my mind, after getting sick, after the months to come, after having developed a thousand yard stare and various mental tics. After all that and more, I'd go back to relive it all again.

In the end I did climb that mountain, the view of the endless desert, the ants crawling around the town madly, everyone being somewhere at once. The top of that mountain was superficial. That was the motivation to travel onwards, not become a weird strung-out bum who had been in Pushkar for eight months.

So I left, with every intention of coming back.

Some time, some day. I know Pushkar will wait for me.