
104



The city of Varanasi on the River Ganges is one of the oldest cities in the world. It is the place where Buddha preached his first sermon and where most of the world's religions are represented. Alongside the famous temples and palaces is a home for the dying operated by the Missionaries of Charity and supposedly once owned by a King of Nepal.

CHAPTER

Varanasi: City of Pilgrims — and Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying

* * * *

IN PREPARATION FOR MY OVERNIGHT TRAIN RIDE to Varanasi, I bought chains and locks to strap my camera equipment to my bunk. After I had crossed the river on a ferry to the Howrah railroad station and entered the frenetic chaos of one of India's busiest stations, I was suddenly overcome with terror at the prospect of taking this second journey alone.

I managed to locate my train and climbed the dusty, iron stairs of the second class, air-conditioned compartment. I was fortunate to obtain a ticket on short notice due to a tourist quota that restricts the number of seats for foreigners. Reservations must be made well in advance. India's railroad transportation system, developed under the British rule, is still the main form of travel in the country. Although the airline industry has expanded over the last few years, it is still far too expensive for most people.

When I found my bottom bunk, an Indian couple who shared the same cubicle were already preparing their home-cooked food out of metal containers. Later they told me that they were making their yearly pilgrimage to their Guru's ashram in a city a few stops past Varanasi. As I secured my camera bags, it suddenly occurred to me that I had completely forgotten about bringing food and only had a bottle of water to sustain me. After the train left the station a vendor came by with a tray filled with hot, spicy meals in cardboard boxes. I knew better than to put my fragile stomach through that challenge.

I had been told at the tourist office that this was an express train and that we would arrive in Varanasi by the following morning. Instead, I was shocked to discover that it was a mail train and that we would stop at every station along the route. For the next twenty hours I tried to fill my empty stomach with crackers and water which I had brought with me. Fortunately I caught up on much needed sleep and between naps ventured out onto the railroad platforms to videotape some very colorful scenes.

* * * *