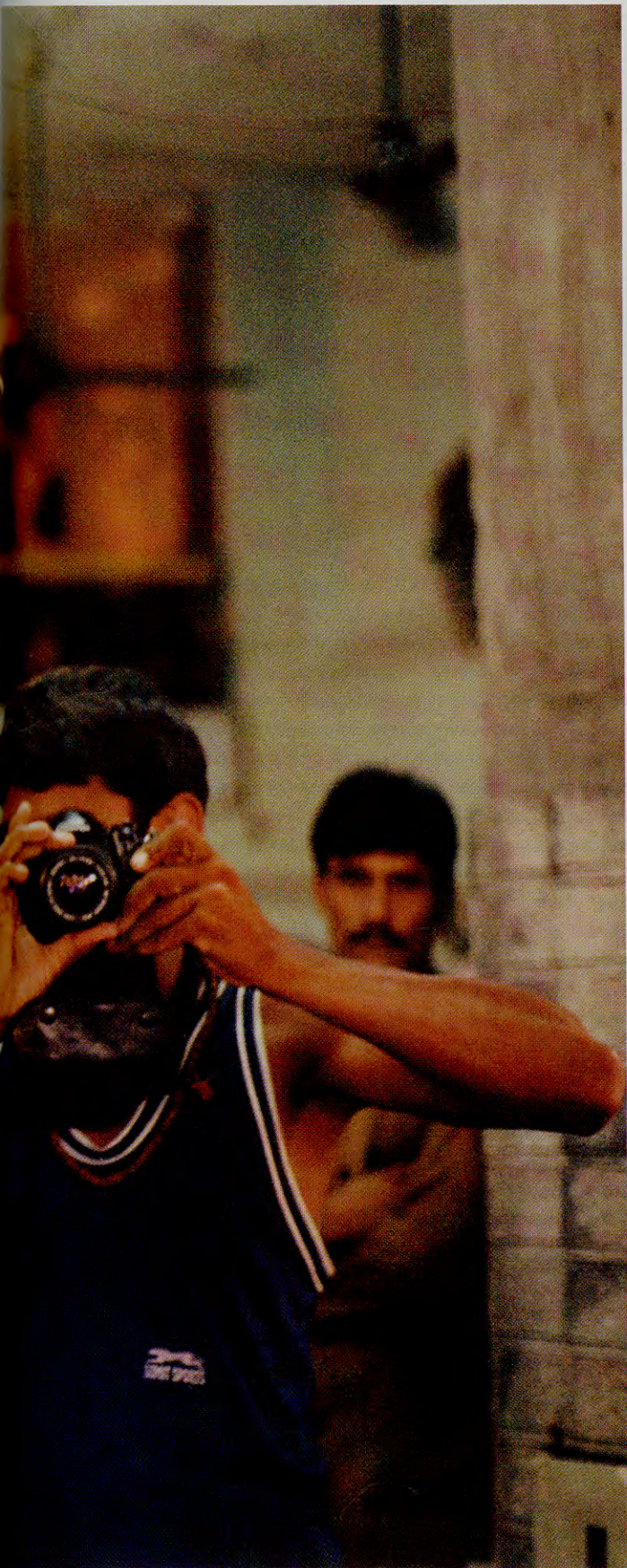


CAIRO, BOMBAY, & A JET NAMED INGRID BERGMAN

a travel diary written and photographed by Nina Menkes



I'm flying to Cairo and Bombay on KLM, my favorite airline, not least because their hub, Schiphol, is exceptionally great on multiple levels.

Our jet is called Ingrid Bergman. I take this as a good omen—it's a film name, and in Cairo I'm making arrangements for my fourth feature, *Heatstroke*.

Set in Los Angeles and Egypt, *Heatstroke* revolves around two estranged sisters, one a celebrity from L.A. (to be played by the wonderful Patricia Clarkson), the other the wife of a diplomat stationed in Cairo (to be played by my sister Tinka Menkes). The filmic sisters represent two sides of a single estranged feminine self—a split which resonates with the larger, now gaping rupture between the West and the Islamic worlds. *Heatstroke* takes place in the mirage-like heat of a contemporary summer—sort of *Persona* meets David Lynch, with a feminist consciousness.

I'm staying at Hotel Longchamps in Zamalek and zipping around via cheap cabs (60 to 90 cents gets you pretty much anywhere), seeing friends and meeting with the production company, Misrfilm, headed by Youssef Chahine, an 80-year-old Egyptian director who recently won a Lifetime Achievement Award at Cannes. They've done a meticulous breakdown on my script, pointing out possible trouble spots. Meanwhile, upstairs at the Avid, Marianne Khoury is editing her film about pioneer women in Egyptian cinema.

After work, I head over to the Cairo Marriott Hotel and Casino for some R and R. The Marriott is a restored palace with endless hallways, ornate ceilings, a lush garden café, and a great pool. Although the pool is a Westernized enclave, there are a few religious women who wear long sleeves and tights so as to enter the water without showing flesh. The staffers all wear badges announcing: "Yes is the answer. What is the question?" Gertrude Stein would agree.

Kuwait Air to Bombay: In classic non-Western disregard for the narrow meaning of time, departure is listed as 17:45, with boarding at 18:10. After two weeks in Cairo, I don't care anymore, and no one else does either. I'm the only Western woman at the gate. It's mainly men and a few women wrapped in black with only two eyes and a forehead showing. The "worst" costume, from my POV, is a yellow metal thing that stretches from the forehead over the nose and covers a woman's entire mouth—a sort of golden gag. Meanwhile, the static-ridden public-address system is playing an instrumental Muzak version of "The Sound of Music."

Arriving in Bombay, I phone my Indian paramour. We get together and break up. He's living with someone else. I note the fact that I will now be experiencing India alone. It's monsoon season, pouring rain. I walk around with my camera. A boy monkey trainer wants me to take his picture. His monkey's name is Michael Jackson. I also photograph a dead cat whose head is already rotten.

I'm staying at the Strand Hotel. The clientele is mainly sheiks with their swathed-in-black female entourages. I'm the only Westerner. No matter where you stay, though, the Bombay weather is intense—pervasive, endless dampness. It's so humid that it's painful to breathe. Also, the hotel overlooks the ocean, which would be nice in a different season, but right now it only adds to the dampness. Plus, for reasons I cannot grasp, all of indoor Bombay is air-conditioned, i.e. freezing. Between the dampness, the low-indoor temperatures, and the heartbreak, I get sick.

The Rajdhani Express from Bombay to Delhi is a sleeper. Reclining in my berth with a raging fever, I am convinced that life (as they say) is a dream, especially in India. But disembarking the next morning in Delhi, the sun is out. It's warm and not raining! On top of that, I'm staying at the Taj Mahal Hotel, Mansingh, Delhi's best hotel. I need a few days in total luxury. If you have a flu and a broken heart, I recommend the Taj. The service is extraordinary and the food is great. It's not cheap, but it's worth every cent.



I have vivid dreams—in one, a huge swarm of ants emerges from a cosmic hole, covering the walls. It's sort of freaky—then they disappear. Another night I dream of four enormous king cobras in different colors. They're just there. They're not restrained, not caged, but not threatening. I believe this means power potential. It's sitting there. Waiting.

I keep remembering one image from Bombay. I'm in a black taxi. It's raining very heavily. A girl of about eight approaches the cab, knocking on the closed window. She's barefoot and wearing nothing but a pair of white underwear. She wants money.

I wish I had taken her picture, but I was either feverish or tired or just overwhelmed by monsoon India. I tell a local friend about my missed shot. "You'll have hundreds of more chances," she replies.

Rishikesh is a holy town on the River Ganges—the "Ganga"—in the lower Himalayas. There is a massive Shiva festival in progress. Thousands of dark-skinned, mainly barefoot pilgrims surround me, all wearing bright, day-glo orange and carrying what looks like a devil's trident (actually, the sign of Shiva) plus a weird glittery something that looks like a giant Christmas tree ornament used for transporting water from one place on the Ganga to another. There are also sadhus (wandering religious ascetics), ordinary beggars, as well as the usual cows, pigs, dogs, and goats. Indian devotional music floats on the air, a different tune blaring from every store, speakers turned up far past the distortion point. Shops are filled with flowers, devotional paintings, conch shells, pyramid-shaped piles of bright red, yellow, and orange powders, dancing goddess statues, crystals, and tacky Shiva postcards.

The air is thick with multiple odors—incense, cow dung, urine, flowers trampled underfoot. Bells clang incessantly and loudly from a 13-story Shiva temple. Humans, cows, lots of monkeys, and motorcycles share a suspension footbridge four feet wide, the only way to cross the Ganga. It sways precariously as we walk. The weather is very hot and very humid. A few men are dressed up like monkeys with giant tails, their faces made up in bright colors. They dab red powder on whoever will agree to it and make a funny purring (or is it growling?) sound. I feel dizzy, as if we're all swirling around on a giant Shiva merry-go-round.

I arrive in the pilgrimage site, Gangotri. At 9,000 feet, it's high in the Himalayas. Gangotri is barely a village and no one speaks English. There's no electricity. The air is thin and fresh. A few mountain people offer to be my guide, via hand signals, for the 27-kilometer hike up to the glacial source of the River Ganges and back. I hire one, but it turns out that a guide isn't strictly necessary, as there is only one narrow, rocky but pretty clear trail, which anyone can follow. That doesn't mean it's an easy hike. In fact, it's extremely dangerous, on the edge of a cliff—one false step and you're dead. Plus, there are three times when you have to cross the Ganga, and "bridge" is too generous a word for the narrow piece of wood lightly balanced on two rocks. I cross on all fours with the river churning below.

Halfway up the mountain is a rest stop, a tent with tea, biscuits, water, and some not very clean mats where travelers literally collapse in a state of exhaustion. I meet a Korean and a German. The German is hiking barefoot as he lost one of his shoes to the Ganga at one of those crossings. The Korean has been spending six months a year in India, trekking for the past nine years. The two share a hash cigarette. The idea of doing this trek, stoned, strikes me as suicidal.

In a dream I see giant Japanese calligraphy emblazoned in the sky. A Japanese female deity appears and stares at me. I wish I knew what the message said! I look at my wrist. I'm wearing two watches—one shows the date and one shows the time. Both watches have gone berserk, the hands spin wildly in various directions.

Much later, hitching a ride with an orange-robed swami, senior disciple of Chidananda (one of India's most esteemed saints), and a friend of his, an elderly woman from Transylvania, I tell my dream, asking for feedback. The swami points out that the swirling watches mean I have tuned into the reality which is beyond time and space. The Transylvanian woman says the Japanese letters mean that I should learn Reiki. At my next stop, I synchronously meet a German woman who lives in a tiny yellow cottage, serves her 75-year-old guru, and teaches Reiki to tourists like myself who are thrilled to learn the mysteries at a fraction of the U.S. cost.

It is in Varanasi (Benares) that I encounter India head on. I'm staying in a nice, clean place called the Schindia Guest House, perched high above the



Ganga, which here is surreally wide, almost indistinguishable from the equally endless dome of the sky. I feel as if we're on top of the world and by reaching out my arm, I can touch heaven.

Outside the hotel, there's no path. The way down to the river is muddy, rocky, full of garbage, and stinks of urine. Sidestepping the garbage, dodging aggressive monkeys, and holding my breath until the smell passes, I arrive at water level at the main cremation ghat. The Hindus believe this is the most auspicious place to die and be cremated, and many are, just now, in the process of burning. There are enormous piles of firewood, heaped to the sky, and old, giant iron scales. On the water are long wooden boats also heaped with tons of firewood. Thick smoke fills the air. Now it's hell and the River Styx, straight out of Dante.

I stand near the burning bodies. The Indians don't mind if you watch, in fact, the atmosphere is very casual. People chat you up, explaining the rituals—usually ending the conversation with, “Come see my silk shop, just look, not buy.” Dogs and goats roam about, boys offer to change dollars. Ram Nam Sat Hai—the name of God is Truth. These words are chanted as an endless stream of bodies is carried on bamboo stretchers to the river wrapped in brightly colored cloth. The body is dipped in the Ganga one last time before burning. About a foot away from the submerged body, a dog splashes in the water, wagging his tail and slurping up a drink. Two feet further, a man washes himself, including brushing his teeth, and next to him, 15 enormous water buffalo are enjoying their morning soak. None of this matters to the crowd of ten-year-old naked boys, jumping and swimming with total joy in the very same area. Meanwhile, bodies are burning. My Western mind boggles at this surreal (and less than hygienic) combination of events, all within the same 20 feet.

A charred body falls off the pyre. The bystanders (family?) manage to get it back up and give it a good whack with a giant stick to make sure it won't fall off again. A foot and a piece of leg fly up into the air and back into the fire. A man who has been washing his clothes in the river approaches and holds up his shirt to the flames. Carefully, he first dries one side and then the other. My eyes are burning from the smoke, but there is no smell of burning flesh. The people explain that because this is a holy place of

Shiva, there is no odor. They also assert that when it rains, the fires continue burning.

Varanasi is built along the water, and the boat ride past the city ghats is possibly the most incredible moment in my two-month journey. My boatman is small and rowing upriver is hard, so he is sweating. The light starts to fade, and the funeral pyres stand out more brightly. We pass devotees practicing Ganga Arati, ritual river worship with clanging bells, drums, little paper boats with fire floating on the water, and hypnotic chanting. Then we pass a floating corpse. Some people (special circumstances or lack of money) go straight into the Ganga without cremation. At the second burning ghat, I watch men pour the ashes from a burnt-out pyre into the water. This person who was cremated is now utterly vanished. Here, the Eastern concept of impermanence is very, very in-your-face. I'm quite sure I am changed for life.

After Varanasi, there's nowhere to go but home. I make a short stop at the Film and Television Institute of India, the country's premiere film school in Pune. I've been invited to teach a graduate class in directing next year and we make plans. Then I head for the airport. Flying home in KLM luxury, I realize that I will never again believe in the certainty of this body, this material existence. But as James Baldwin says, “We are each unique, irreplaceable, and just passing through, and it is these qualities which define our responsibility.” Namaste.

EGYPT: The Four Seasons Hotel, 35 Giza Street, Giza, Cairo. (800) 819-5053 or www.fourseasons.com. The very best spa and health club in Cairo—especially try their Cleopatra's Bath and Nefertiti facials. **Cairo Marriott Hotel and Omar Khayyam Casino**, Saraya El Gezira Street, Zamalek, Cairo. (800) 228-9290 or www.marriott-hotels.com. Fabulous pool and garden café. **Hotel Longchamps**, 21 Ismail Mohamed Street, Zamalek, Cairo. (20) (2) 735-2311-12 or www.hotel-longchamps.com. An excellent, inexpensive hotel with great balconies.

INDIA: Taj Mahal Hotel, One Mansingh Road, New Delhi. (91-11) 302-6162 or www.tajhotels.com. The premiere luxury hotel in India, with locations throughout the country, including Mumbai/Bombay and Delhi. Getting there: **KLM/Northwest** (800) 374-7747 or www.klm.com, www.nwa.com.