



April Cornell on travelling
and living in India

Description

Sometimes you need to let go of a schedule and just go with the flow

By *Carmen J. Michaud*

The Prologue

5:00 am. The alarm sounded.

She had told me that if I want to go to be ready to leave at 5:30 am.

I dressed and opened the door to my room. She was in the hall and gave me a thumbs-up.

A basket had been prepared with tea and biscuits. The driver was waiting outside.

The drive to Sultanpur, the bird sanctuary, took about half an hour. At that time of the morning, the roads were quiet.

It had been a “good monsoon” so the pools around an elevated walkway were filled with water. She had told me to keep an eye out for a Sarus Crane, a five-foot bird. A pair of binoculars was hung around my neck.



Sarus Cranes

Image: J.M.Garg [CC BY-SA 3.0], [via Wikimedia Commons](#)

We walked along the trail sighting small birds and insects. April knew the names of all the birds and excitedly shared her knowledge. Our driver Surinder aided us when we faltered and slipped into the water or got stuck in bramble.

There was a tree in the distance laden with painted storks. The tree appeared light pink and black so plentiful were the birds. We saw the nest of a weaver bird. A basket of twigs resembling a gourd hanging from a tree.

Suddenly in front of me was a head of a bird bobbing through the tall grasses. A head with bright red markings and a white band. I turned to get April's attention. Her head, with binoculars fixed, was facing the other direction. In my loudest whisper, I called her name. I wanted her to turn but I did not want to frighten the bird. It was now making its way across the path. Grey plumage on its rounded body and long skinny legs. I had never seen so large a bird. It paid no attention to me. April saw the crane as it made its way through the grasses on the other side and then took flight. An eight-foot wingspan. It's difficult to explain the sense of wonder and the respect one has at that moment for this creature. Delicate, striking and so powerful.

Later, on a shaded part of the pathway ahead of us there stood an Indian Blue Bull or Nilgai. This is the largest Asian antelope. He stood staring at us. April started to approach. Surinder cautioned, "No Madam". A six-foot male antelope is not to be taken lightly. We waited. He moved on and we jauntily stepped over his business.

As we returned to our starting point, April took a photo of me among the tall grasses, binocular hanging from my neck. Exhilarated, there was a huge smile on my face.

Back home, looking through photos in the office, I found two similar photos of previous designers, taken in the same spot.

A rite of passage.

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I had not seen April in almost twenty years. We had exchanged emails and messages on Facebook in recent

years. She looked much the same. Delicate, almost girl-like, which belies the strong backbone and determination contained. We settled in, with a pot of tea, surrounded by florals.



April, you were an early traveller to Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan, India. What compelled you to go to these places?

Wanderlust, and the idea of starting a business. Things from the east were just beginning to arrive in Montreal. They were rich and glorious. New and unseen. Afghanistan was a stop on the way to Thailand. But I never made it to Thailand.

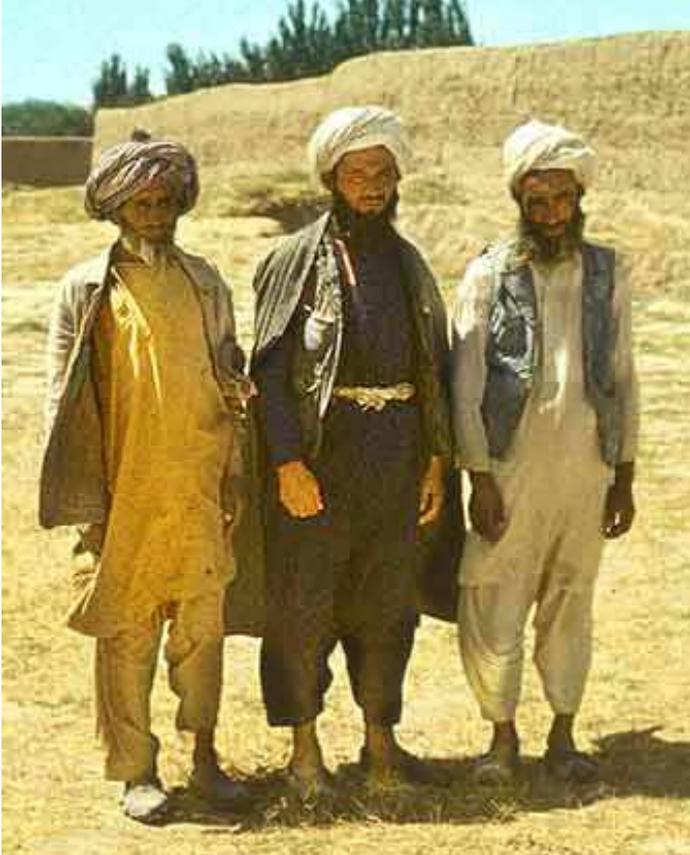
I've never been to Afghanistan. What don't we know? What are the people of Afghanistan like?

There are many different ethnic groups in Afghanistan – so they are not all the same – broadly, the city folk, who I was most exposed to, were the majority. The men were exceedingly handsome. Very raffish turbans, kind of casual and sloppy with a loose tail hanging down. Rugged looking. They wore a common uniform – a many-pocketed vest, over a long kurta and loose pants. Design inspiration!

The rule of hospitality was active everywhere. Always traditional, with polite and warm greetings, sitting on the floor on kelims, with the offer of chai. No chairs. They had an expression that the king and the commoner sat the same way, on the floor together.

Women were mostly invisible in that they were wearing a chaderi, and their faces and bodies were completely covered behind pale blue silk robes, with an embroidered mesh screen through which they saw. They looked like a group of human doves walking together, fluttering blue robes, but anonymous. However at people's homes, I mixed freely with the women and children.

The nomadic women were different from their urban sisters, striding in colourful koochi dresses, black eyes, and long black hair blowing. Strong, physical, part of the nomadic camel trains crisscrossing central Asia. Silent, unapproachable. Proud.



Afghan men in typical attire – Image: Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Adam Mickiewicz University [CC BY-SA 3.0 pl], via Wikimedia Commons

The Turkomen people were another ethnic group – also nomadic. Tall headdresses. Regal, independent. Tough. Gorgeous. Somewhat stern. Wonderful hand wrought silver jewelry. Carpets. And the Uzbeks and the Hazara, with intricately embroidered skull caps, each with their own cultural legacy, their own language, and crafts and textile traditions. So fascinating. But alive, real, interactive, outgoing and trading as in days of old. It was an active and fascinating place.

You have spoken of bringing back Afghani socks to sell. Where did you sell them, and what made you think people would want them?

They were so colourful and appealing – each pair was different – of course people would like them! We sold them originally in a stall on Ste-Catherine Street – Labyrinthe. A bit like a pop-up market of today, then Greene Avenue at La Cache in a second floor shop. They were the Christmas hit!

You felt a strong connection to India, living there for a time. Was it immediate or were there events or certain people who made this happen?

India was such a contrast to Afghanistan. At first I preferred Afghanistan, where people felt more direct, and up front. Overtime India grew on me. It's complexity, its colourful tradition-steeped world. And its people. Its love of family, and acceptance of foreigners. And the textile wealth was unrivalled.

Your children were young when you lived in Delhi. Did this present challenges? How do you feel this has contributed to their lives?

They fit right in. Indians are so welcoming. There is a courtesy and a civility in the east that is palpable. They did go to an American school, with over 65 nationalities, which was new for them. But that international community was always very accepting.

I think they came to love India, and feel almost as at home there as I do. When we left, my son Lee said maybe we should stay another year. When we returned to Montreal, he asked a profound question – why are Indians so nice?



Tell us a bit about when you first lived in India and the changes that have taken place. The everyday changes.

There were only two models of cars in India, when I first went there, both Indian-made. So traffic wasn't much, the streets of New Delhi were tree-lined, walkable. There was a lot of bird life. On the road to Jaipur, there were plenty of camels. Markets were informal, no shopping malls. There were many specialty melas, like fairs, for

shopping – artisans from Lucknow, or Calcutta would set up their wares for a few days. And everyone would go to them to shop. It was a simpler time. The white-backed vulture was ubiquitous, now endangered.



Indian textile merchant
Image: Agung Pandit Wiguna from Pexels

Very few imported goods.

Everything was local! It was difficult to get a phone or make an overseas phone call.

Since then, the Indian economy has exploded, and along with it the infrastructure, massive building projects and new highways, snarling traffic. A growing middle class. More opportunities, but still so much to achieve.

Are there misrepresentations of the East that you would like to correct, or you would like to elucidate?

People worry about safety – I have almost never felt threatened or in danger in over 40 years of travel. I have always felt respected and safe.

Indians know how to dress up! It is a land of glorious textiles and incredible embellishments. You can't overdress! They know how to party and have fun.

India has become an incredible fashion leader.

There is a lot of complexity. It can't be summed up.

Bargaining and buying – lots of people find this awkward. Don't worry about it too much. You'll learn as you go. Have some fun with it. I am not bothered by street hawkers – in fact I will often buy something from them – the newest novelty fold-up fan let's say – but when I don't want something, I politely and firmly say so.

You have never been a tourist. You have always been a traveller. What advice would you give to others on how to be a traveller and get the most out of their trip.

It is really helpful to have a focus, other than hanging out. In India it could be searching out certain kinds of textiles, or going birding, finding a guide and learning the local birds.

Visiting the wildlife sanctuaries, finding an art store in a new city, can lead to all kind of interesting discoveries. Listening to music – find out where different musicians are playing and go listen to them – you'll find new areas and people who share like interests – and you will be off the beaten path. Ride a train! A smile can go a long way to making friends! Things always change, sometimes you need to let go of a schedule and just go with the flow.



The sun was starting to set so it seemed a good time to part. I thought I'd end with a few questions from the Proustian Questionnaire... Always interesting.

What is your idea of perfect happiness?

I am happiest when painting, by a window, in the afternoon, with the sunlight touching me, I have had some happy hotel experiences like this too, looking onto the marketplace. Being an observer. Making a note of it. Pure bliss.

Which talent would you most like to have?

I would love to sing.

When and where were you happiest?

No single memory stands out. I experience a lot of happiness, and I hope to keep having those feelings.

What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?



Loss of a loved one.

What do you most value in your friends?

Their uniqueness.

What is your current state of mind?

Very, very full.

If you were to die and come back as a person or a thing, what would it be?

An orchid in an untended tropical garden.

Images of Anril Cornell by [James St Laurent](#)

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Carmen J. Michaud likes to write (and paint) and is majoring in Curiosity.



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