



5 ASIA

Asia, the largest of the five continents, covers 44.6 million square kilometers, occupying nearly a third of all dry land. Connected to Asia, in terms of size Europe may be considered a kind of a mere spur or “peninsula” belonging to Asia. With its 47 countries, the Asian continent hosts four billion people. China and India alone have 2.5 billion people, which is more than a third of the world’s population.

The continent stands out, not only for its size, but also for the diversity of its cultural and natural wealth. In the Middle East, wedged between the Arab and Muslim worlds there is Israel – the only democratic country in the region. Although today the Jews’ “promised land” is not more than 22,000 square kilometers (8,400 sq mi) large, it witnessed so much in the past, both good and bad! Most of the Jews, but also Palestinians, recognize Jerusalem as their capital. The history of the city dates back 6,000 ago. It is a place where three monotheistic religions converge. Muslims consider Jerusalem the third holiest site after Mecca and Medina. If I were to name the city that I consider the world’s most important, it would not be New York, London or Tokyo with their stock exchanges, fashion and shopping centers, but simply Jerusalem.

As Southern Asia is dominated by India, it comes as no surprise that it is referred to as a “subcontinent”. It is home to more than a billion people and the cradle of two other world religions – Hinduism and Buddhism. Prince Siddhartha Gautama, or Buddha, was born in Nepal but found enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, India, at the age of 35.

India is a country of contrasts. Despite the fact that it is referred to as “the greatest democracy in the world”, it also has the largest number of people living in absolute poverty. It owns atomic weapons, which creates tension with another nuclear power, Pakistan.

India is one of the few countries in the world which still has a caste system. Although abolished more than 60 years ago, it cannot be eliminated in real life, and so the barriers that separate social groups continue to exist.

Hindus and Buddhists believe in reincarnation, which may contribute to fatalism, apathy and a lack of interest in taking their fate in their own hands. If you are not doing well, it is a natural consequence of past sins and the best thing you can do is to endure your fate with patience. Then your next life might be better. I still remember an old, sick, probably dying dog in Calcutta. No one hurt it, but nobody helped it either, everyone just walked by impassively. I feel that some of the poorest people meet a similar fate.

In the north India borders with the Middle Kingdom, that is, China. The name suggests how highly the Chinese think of themselves. They are the center of the world and everything else is the periphery. This makes sense to a certain degree because the first Chinese dynasty was established as early as 4,000–5,000 years ago. At that time our ancestors in Europe were still “climbing in the trees” and the agricultural cultivation of the central, western and northern Europe would not begin until some 1,500 years ago.

From the late 14th to the beginning of the 17th century under the Ming dynasty the Chinese built the Great Wall of China. This brought about isolation, and when, in the 19th century, the Chinese faced the military and technological superiority of the British, it was a very painful and humiliating experience for them.

Further north there is the world’s largest country, Russia. Although a large part of it lies in Asia, Russia has always striven to be more of a European power. The beautiful city of St Petersburg, founded in the early 18th century by Peter the Great, was to be the gateway to Europe. In the 20th century Russia carried out a terrible experiment on itself – an attempt to build a paradise on earth using an atheistic religion – communism. The consequences the country will still take a long time to recover from include, among others, alcoholism and an absolute decline in population. Russia used to have a population of 150 million, today it is 139 million, and if the trend continues, by 2050 there will be only 111 million.

Far to the east, a cluster of four large islands and many smaller ones hold the Land of the Rising Sun, Japan. In spite of the fact that the country is about five times larger than the Czech Republic and has “only” 127 million inhabitants, in his famous book “The Clash of Civilizations” Samuel Huntington identified Japan as one of the eight or nine major civilizations. (Besides Japan, they are the Euro-American, Orthodox, Hispanic, Islamic, Chinese, Hindu, Buddhist and Sub-Saharan civilizations. The last civilization mentioned belongs only potentially as it only involves a group of tribal communities.)

Japan has a very unpredictable and dangerous neighbor, the last relic of hard-line communism, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Remembering how complicated was the reunification of Germany, it is hard to imagine what the future holds for the Korean peninsula. Problems may arise due to the fact that the North Korean regime has long been economically unsustainable and in mortal agony it may do anything, especially since it has learnt to blackmail the world so skillfully with its nuclear weapons.

Asia, especially in its southern and eastern parts, has always been densely populated while suffering from a lack of land. Rice is the typical crop, and its collective cultivation (a system of joint irrigation, planting and harvesting) has probably shaped the Asian mentality differently from the European or American mentality. The individual conforms to society and its benefit; individual ambitions are unimportant. Lately, we may have been witnessing a change. Korean, Japanese and Chinese parents project their ambitions onto their children (often only children), who are then subjected to a strict drill in order to become the best at school and selected hobbies (music, sports, and so on). This may bring results but not a happy childhood.

Europe and North America are beginning to accept the idea that the 21st century will belong to Eastern and Southern Asia, with China becoming the center of civilizational development. I am not so sure. For Europe, the current developments could mean the interesting challenge of not looking for its future only in increasing material production. As China neglects human rights and the social and environmental standards of work, there is no way we could compete with it in the production of cheap goods (otherwise we would have to adopt the present Chinese standards, which would be to step one or two centuries back). The Chinese communist government is determined to build its “Chinese dream”. We Europeans should formulate our own “European dream”. The question is what will become of them.

5.1 Israel



Israel is a country the establishment of which on 14 May 1948 caused perhaps the biggest controversy in modern history. It was founded following the adoption of a UN resolution in the former British Mandate. The neighboring Arab countries of course resented this and several of them declared war on Israel the very next day. Since then, Israel has fought several other bloody conflicts but is still there even today. It is the only democratic country in the Middle East. It is no more than 20,770 square kilometers in area, with a population of 7.5 million inhabitants (76% Jews, 19% Arabs and 5% other minorities). The Negev and Judean deserts along with other barren areas take up a vast portion of the country. The density of 355 inhabitants per square kilometer is one of the highest in the world and it is surprising that Israel is able to manage considering these hard natural conditions.

Most countries recognize Tel Aviv-Jaffa as the capital, but for Israelis their capital is Jerusalem. Two thirds of the city's population are Jews, a third Muslims and about 2% Christians. It is the holiest place on earth for Jews and Christians, and the third holiest for Muslims (after Mecca and Medina).

The Wailing Wall has become the holiest site for Jews, where pilgrims come from all over the world to say their prayers, which they often write on a piece of paper and place it between the stones. Note the barrier separating the women and men praying. The Wailing Wall used to be a part of the outer city walls, which in the era of the second Temple in Jerusalem ran around the Temple Mount. This second Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in the First Jewish-Roman War in 70 AD, after the Jews unsuccessfully revolted against the Romans in 66 AD. The First Temple in Jerusalem was built on the Temple Mount by King Solomon between 970 and 931 BC.



Today the Temple Mount holds the Dome of the Rock (sometimes incorrectly referred to as the Mosque of Omar). It was built between 687 and 691 AD and the Muslims believe that it was from this place the Prophet Muhammad set out in 621 AD on the Night Journey to Heaven, accompanied by the archangel Gabriel. The rock on which the Dome of the Rock stands was the very site where Abraham carried out God's test – he showed his devotion to God through his readiness to sacrifice his son Isaac. The location is literally brimming with historical events of great significance for the three monotheistic religions.

A little south of the Dome of the Rock we can see the Al-Aqsa Mosque. It is located in the eastern part of Jerusalem, which Israel took in 1967, but the Palestinians still consider this part of Jerusalem as the capital of their future state. The mosque can hold up to 5,000 worshippers. Non-Muslims have been given limited access since 2000, when the Second Intifada broke out.

I was in Israel in September 1990, when the First Intifada was going on (it lasted from 1987 to 1993). It involved a Palestinian uprising and the subsequent armed conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Once a rock landed on the roof of Avia-Furgon, our expedition car, breaking through the laminate roof. Only later did we realize why it had happened. Our license plate had yellow background, similar to the Israeli cars. Thanks to the color the assailants knew which cars to throw rocks at. Fortunately, no one was hurt.



The Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher (also called the Church of the Resurrection by Eastern Christians) is located in a place that most Christians worship as Golgotha, or Calvary Mount, where Jesus Christ was crucified. For Christians it is therefore one of the holiest places in the world. The church has been a major Christian place of pilgrimage since the 4th century.



The Garden of Gethsemane lies at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Jesus watched and prayed here the night before he was arrested and crucified. The Jews believe that once the Messiah arrives, he will resurrect the dead here on his way to Jerusalem. Therefore, the western slope of the Mount of Olives has been used as the largest Jewish cemetery in the world.



The Garden of Gethsemane is dominated by the Church of All Nations, also called the Church of the Agony.



Another landmark on the Mount of Olives is the Dominus Flevit Church. This is where Jesus wept over the future fate of the city. The church was therefore built to resemble a tear.



To us, Europeans, the depiction of the Virgin Mary with Jesus can sometimes seem quite unconventional. In the Church of the Pater Noster (Our Father), you will for example come across this picture, I think it is Korean, in which Mary and her child have striking Asian features.



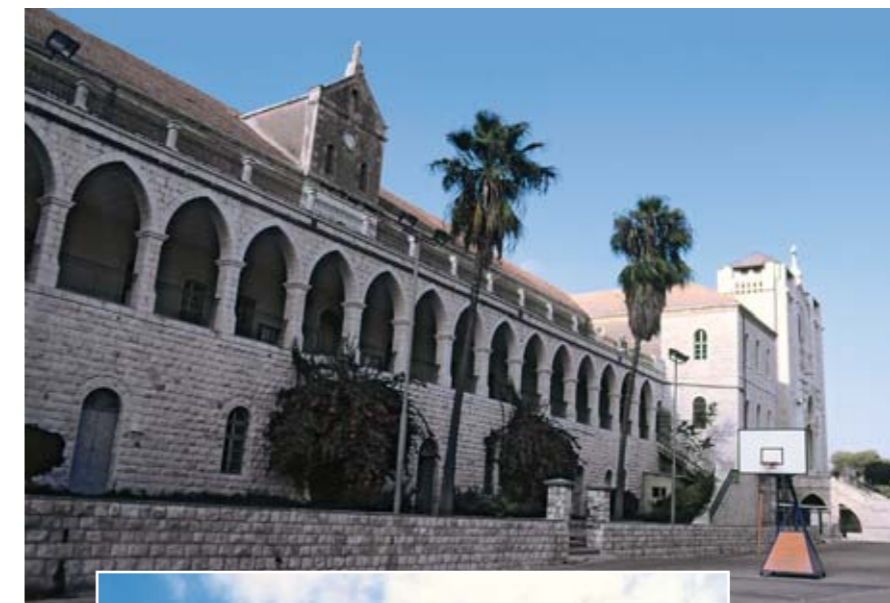
Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem. Rachel was the wife of the Patriarch Jacob. This place is a symbol of the return of the Jewish people to their homeland.

About 30 kilometers south of Jerusalem, in Judea on the West Bank of the Jordan River, under Palestinian jurisdiction, the Judean Mountains nestle Hebron (180,000 inhabitants). Here you can visit the Mausoleum of the Patriarchs – a place of pilgrimage for Jews, Christians, as well as Muslims. According to tradition, the people buried here include prominent Jewish patriarchs of the Old Testament with their wives: Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah.





Approximately 8 kilometers (5 mi) from Jerusalem there lies the small (30,000 inhabitants) town of Bethlehem, where David is said to have been crowned King of Israel. Above all, however, it is the birthplace of Jesus. It is also home to one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. The photo shows the Church of the Nativity, one of the oldest Christian shrines.



The Salesian monastery in Nazareth. Here Jesus Christ spent his teenage years. The monastery includes a church, which is reportedly the only one in the world dedicated to the teenage Jesus, as the modern language would put it.



On the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee there is the former fishing village of Capernaum, a witness to many biblical events. Several of Jesus' apostles lived here, and here is also where Jesus moved from Nazareth after the imprisonment of John the Baptist. The photo shows the remains of the synagogue in which Jesus began his public preaching. In 746 Capernaum was hit by a big earthquake and was never restored.



The site of Christ's first miracle at Cana of Galilee. In this place, at his mother's request, Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding, even though "his hour had not yet come" to serve publicly.

Not far from the Sea of Galilee is the Mount of Beatitudes with an octagonal chapel, which commemorates what is for me the most revolutionary speech in the history of mankind. With his eight Beatitudes, Jesus introduced changes in values, turning everything upside down. No more "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth", but "love your enemies". We have, as yet, been unable to fully embrace and adopt this challenge.

The Sea of Galilee, or Lake of Gennesaret, the site of Jesus' ministry and many of his miracles. The life-giving River Jordan flows through the lake, ending its journey in the Dead Sea.



St. George's Monastery in the Judean Desert. Wherever there is water there is life. People would leave for the desert in search of the connection between the natural and the supernatural, a way to eternity. Free of almost all the influences and perceptions of the outside world, they could concentrate on the inner world.



Qumran on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea is the site of perhaps the greatest archaeological discovery of the 20th century. In 1946 Bedouins accidentally discovered vessels concealing the Dead Sea Scrolls in a local cave. The scrolls contain biblical and other religious texts. The longest (7.43 meters [24.4 ft]) contained a text by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah from the 2nd century BC. In some rolls there are Christian texts (a part of the First Epistle of Paul to Timothy and a passage from the Gospel of St. Mark).



The fortress of Masada in the Judean Desert, close to the Dead Sea. Built by Herod the Great as an unconquerable fortress, it had its own source of water and enough food for two years. During the Jewish revolt against the Romans Masada was in the hands of the militant Zealot sect. For two years about 1,000 people (including women and children) successfully held out here against the Romans. This was a great disgrace for the Romans. Therefore, other Jews, dragged here from elsewhere, had to pile a huge siege embankment up against the walls, which is still there today. This attempt to conquer the fortress nevertheless failed as well, and the only option was to starve out the Zealots. When after two years they indeed were about to run out of food, the Zealot leader gathered the people in the courtyard. He chose ten men, who were to kill everyone in the fort. Then one of the ten men killed the remaining nine, set the fortress ablaze, and committed suicide. When the soldiers entered the fortress, they found only two people, a mother and her daughter, had survived to tell them the story.

The Dead Sea is the lowest place on the planet – located 420 meters below sea level. It is up to 380 meters deep, with a salinity of 33.7%. This makes it impossible to drown, you float like a cork. If you, however, had to swim for several kilometers in such a sea, you would perish from sunburn from the bright sun, dehydration and exhaustion.

The Dead Sea is drying up quickly because the main tributary is the River Jordan, from which mainly Israelis draw the majority of water for irrigation. There are therefore plans to save the Dead Sea by bringing water from the south, from the Gulf of Aqaba of the Red Sea.

Not far away there is the “miracle in the desert”, the Ein Gedi Kibbutz, founded in 1953. Israeli farming is one of the most advanced in the world and its main organizational unit is the kibbutzim (comparable very loosely to the Czech agricultural cooperatives).

The Negev Desert in the south occupies 69% (!) of Israel (13,000 square kilometers [4,700 sq mi]). Today the desert is home to about 380,000 Jews (especially in Beersheba and Eilat) and 175,000 Bedouins, and a number of kibbutzim. Large sections of the desert are used by the army, with no public access. Although it may not seem so, life and human activities have been present in the area.



Masada became a symbol of Jewish defiance: “Masada shall not fall again” is to say that the Jews will never leave their country again, and they would rather die as free people than live in slavery or in exile. Some Jews, however, do not share this view, and Masada thus becomes a symbol of controversy in society. Firstly, by committing suicide, the Zealot group sinned against their own religious precepts. Secondly, even a nation that falls into captivity has a chance that one day it will be free and hold its head up high. A nation that dies will never rise again. Safed is a city in Galilee, located about 50 kilometers (31 mi) from the Port of Haifa. The altitude of 700 meters provides pleasant living conditions even in summer. Not so long ago Safed became well-known as a center for Jewish learning and Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism). Legend has it that the city was founded after the Flood by Noah's sons. Today it is also seen as a city of artists. It is nice to get lost in its ancient streets, where you can enjoy paintings by local artists displayed.





Thirty kilometers north of the Gulf of Aqaba there is the Timna Valley cradling a national park of the same name. Eight thousand years ago copper was extracted here and in the 10th century BC King Solomon had his mines here. The picture shows King Solomon's Pillars, a natural sandstone formation created by water erosion.



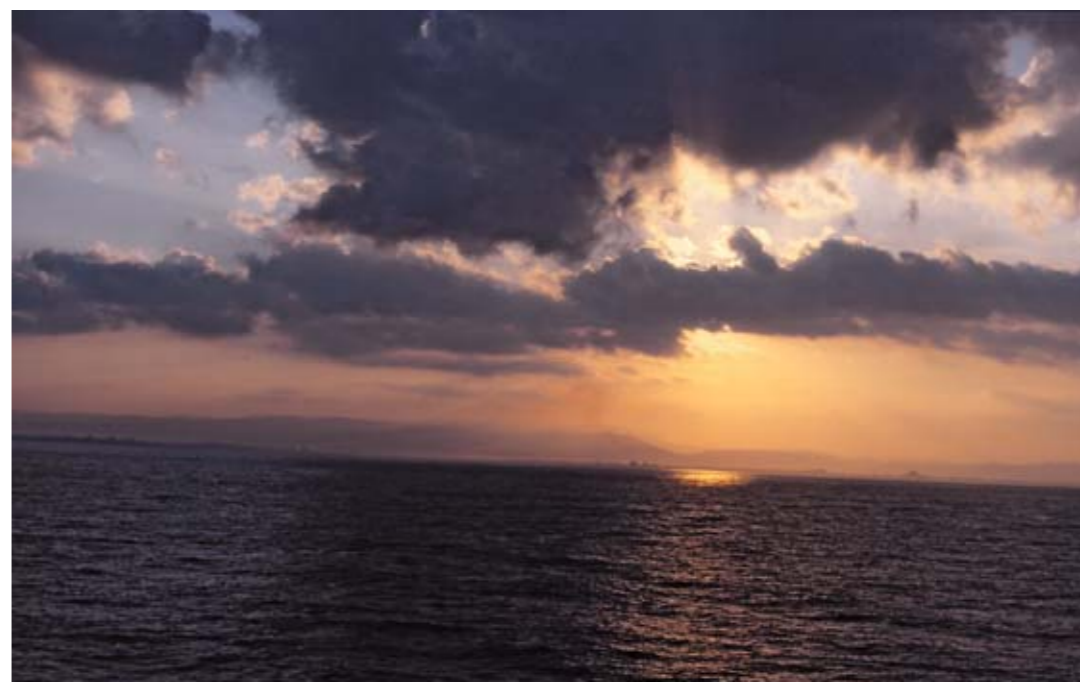
This rock formation in the Timna Valley is called the Mushroom. It was formed over centuries by the joint effects of wind and water erosion, where the less resistant soil gradually wore away, leaving a mushroom-shaped sandstone monolith.



The southernmost tip of Israel holds the city of Eilat. From the local port you can see four countries – Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The sea is great for swimming and exploring the underwater world all year long. Although the local coral reefs cannot compare in size with, for example, the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, life here is just as varied and rich.



We say goodbye to the "promised land" and follow the setting sun along Cyprus to Rhodes, Greece. Here we will change to a small ship that will take us to the port of Marmaris, Turkey, within two hours.



5.2 Turkey

Turkey occupies a strategic position between Europe and Asia. Of its total 780,000 square kilometers (303,000 sq mi) only 23,764 (14,766) extend into Europe, with the rest belonging to Asia. It has a population of almost 70 million inhabitants, of whom 14 million are Kurds in the east. Turks are the heirs of the large and belligerent Ottoman Empire, founded in 1299 by Osman I. The empire was abolished only in 1923, when Kemal Atatürk founded the republic with an emphasis on the secularization of the state. The fact that for more than 700 years Turkey was in the Ottoman Empire, where the sultan had absolute power, probably caused the country to lag behind. In the 20th century, Turkey's economy recorded a major advance. It has long been committed to joining the European Union, but Europe seems to be too afraid to let seventy million people, mainly of the Islamic faith, join the "club".

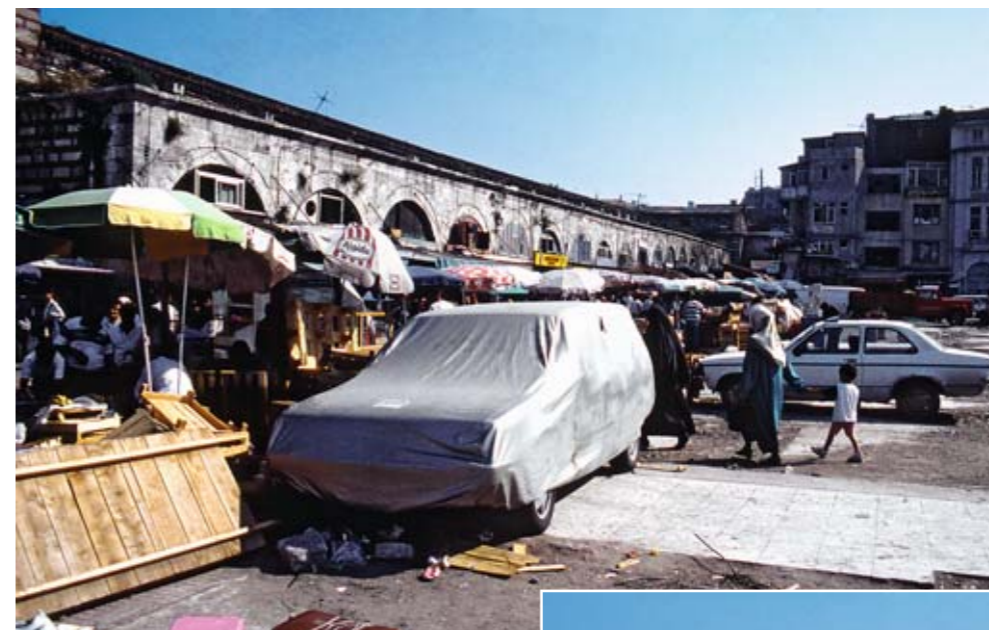
A city of five million, Ankara (photo above) has been the capital of Turkey since the establishment of the Republic. Together with Istanbul it seems like a modern city, but the differences between the lifestyle in these cities and life in the countryside, particularly in the eastern parts of the country are profound.



Istanbul is nicknamed the "Gate to the Orient". It lies on two continents and in the past it was also called Byzantium or Constantinople. Despite being the centre of the Byzantine Empire until 1453 (the Western Roman Empire ceased to exist in 476), in the 7th century it started losing its Roman and ancient character.

This is a photo of Hagia Sophia. From 532 to 537 it was built by 10,000 men. It was originally a Christian basilica but after the Ottomans conquered Constantinople it was converted into a mosque (and four minarets added). In 1934 Kemal Atatürk had the mosque rebuilt as a museum (as part of the secularization of the state).

Istanbul has now more than 11 million people, while the uncontrolled influx of people from rural areas continues. Thanks to its European lifestyle, Istanbul can be considered a modern city; on the other hand, it also has neighborhoods that resemble the megalopolises of developing countries. It is characterized by crowded streets, poverty (although to a lesser extent than for example in African cities), street vendors trying to make a living by selling virtually anything, and the ever-present garbage in public places. Istanbul continues to straddle two worlds even today. Or we could also say that it represents an imaginary bridge connecting two worlds.



This division between Europe and the Orient is not only cultural but also geographic. The Bosphorus is a strait separating the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, which then continues through the Dardanelles strait into the Aegean and later the Mediterranean Sea. The Bosphorus is 29 kilometers (19 mi) long and nearly four kilometers (2.3 mi) wide. At the narrowest point there are only 650 meters (2,450 ft) separating the two continents. Istanbul extends on both sides, with two road bridges facilitating transport. A tunnel is being built now to provide a railway connection and to finally join the separated sections of the Istanbul metro.



A few kilometers from the western coast of Turkey towards the interior there are the ruins of Ephesus. The city was founded by colonists from Athens about three thousand years ago. The photo shows the remains of the Library of Celsus; however, the ruins of the Temple of Artemis are considered more famous. The latter rank among the seven wonders of the ancient world.

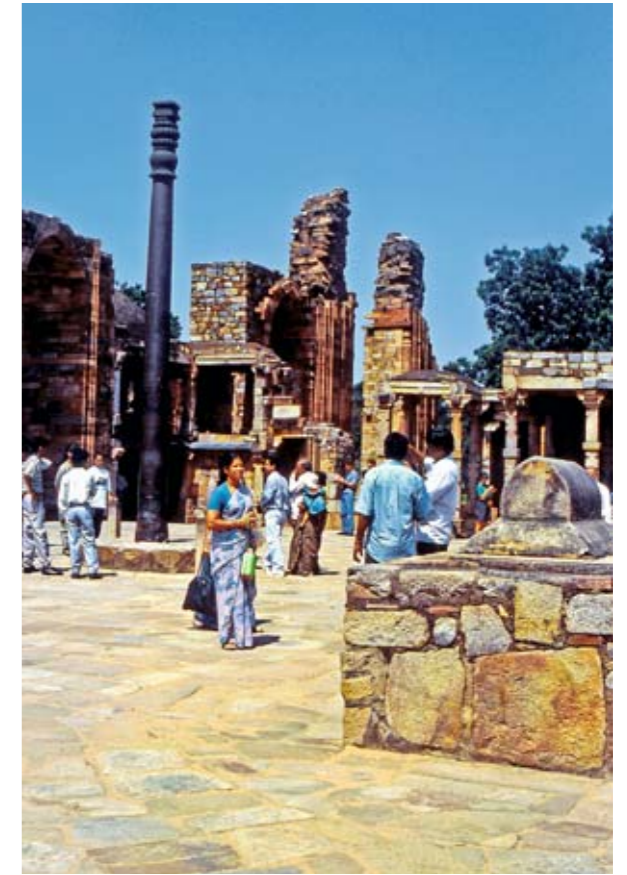
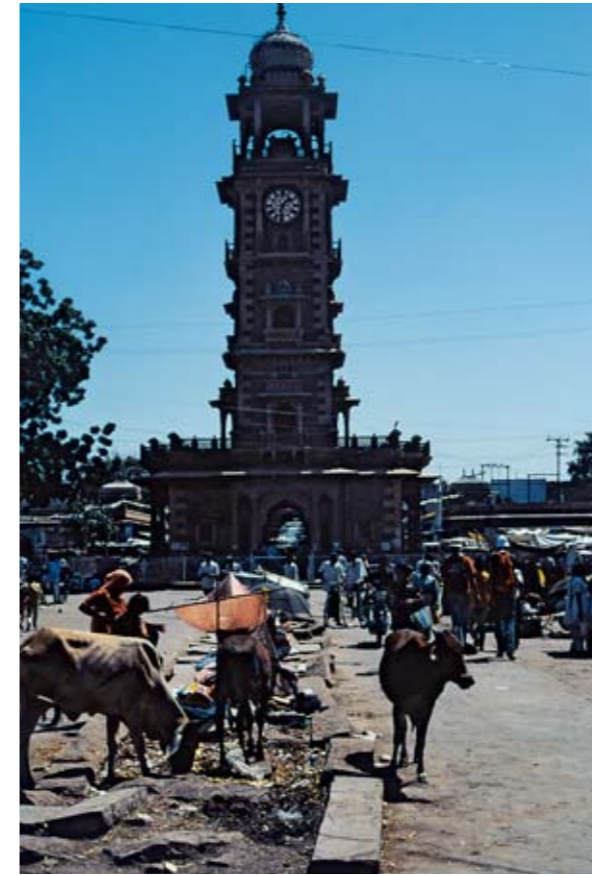
The legend has it that after Jesus was crucified, his mother Mary and his disciple John left for Ephesus. Ephesus is also mentioned in the New Testament, in Apostle Paul's epistle to the city's Christian community.





5.3 India

One life is not enough for a person to absorb and understand the diversity of the Indian sub-continent. India is a country of breathtaking scenery but also of a caste system, something that we find hard to understand. While it was officially abolished with the country's independence in 1947, the social stratification into castes reaches back to the 2nd millennium BC and therefore it is very resistant to change.

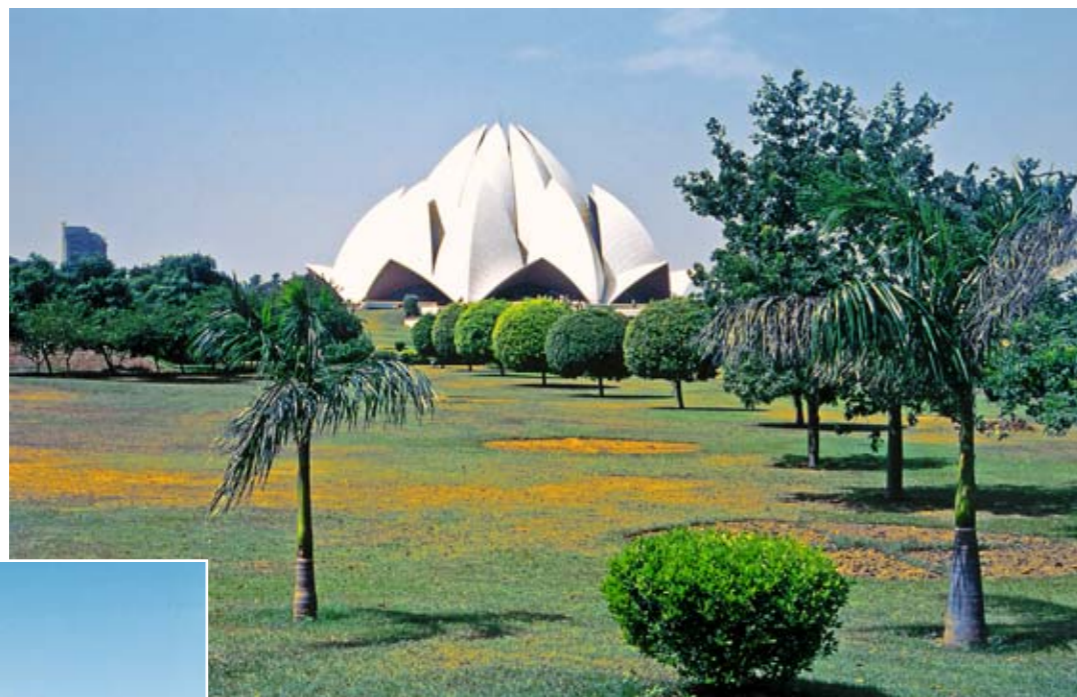


When Europeans arrive in Delhi, their senses are stupefied by the strong sensations of the masses of people (the city has 14 million inhabitants), the heat, the noise and various odors. After a few days one can get used to it to some extent.

For a long time a seven-and-a-half-ton rust-free iron column was a source of great mystery in Delhi. It owes its extreme resistance to the fact that it contains a large amount of phosphorous compound, which, together with air humidity and oxygen, formed a highly protective coating just one-twentieth of a millimeter thick on the surface.

India is a country of 1.2 billion inhabitants, great power ambitions, its own nuclear weapons and a space program. Although India is a major rice exporter, 200 million of its people live in absolute poverty.





The Baha'i House of Worship, an architecturally beautiful building inspired by the blossoming lotus flower, resembles to some extent the opera house in Sydney, Australia. The Baha'i faith is a 150-year-old monotheistic religion that has six million followers worldwide. It was founded by Bahá'u'lláh, who declared in Baghdad, Iraq in 1863 that his coming fulfilled the prophecy of all previous religions. The followers of this religion consider him the last of God's messengers, who included Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster, Christ and Muhammad.

Fatehpur Sikri was built by Akbar, ruler of the Mughal Empire. The Mughals were Muslims from what is now Afghanistan, who controlled a large part of the Indian subcontinent for nearly 300 years. It is a "ghost town". It was built as a model capital city, but from its completion in 1571 it functioned for only 14 years. In 1585 it was abandoned by Akbar and his court, who left to defend the northwestern frontier of the empire. He never returned to the city.

A symbol of India is an architectural wonder of the world – the Taj Mahal. This 72-meter-high (240 ft) marble building studded with precious and semiprecious stones grew under the hands of 20,000 workers for 22 years.



The Taj Mahal is a mausoleum that Akbar's grandson Shah Jahan (who reigned from 1627 until 1658) had built for his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal, who had given him eight sons and six daughters by the time she turned 36, dying at the birth of the fourteenth child.

The Taj Mahal stands on the banks of the Yamuna River. It is said that Shah Jahan wanted to build a similar building from black marble for himself to be buried once he died. In 1658 he was nevertheless dethroned by his third son Aurangzeb and imprisoned in the nearby Agra Fortress. It was a comfortable prison, and we can only speculate if the son did the right thing. Constructing another tomb would have perhaps ruined the empire economically.

Today, the Taj Mahal is facing a major threat from air pollution, from acid rain to be more precise. The rain is corroding the marble and friezes with the beautiful ornaments, gradually destroying them.



We cannot build another Taj Mahal. But if there was no Taj Mahal, this tomb of Bibi Ka Maqbara in Aurangabad would probably be considered a great work of art. As it is, however, it remains overlooked. It was built at the end of the 17th century by Prince Azam Shah for his mother.

India is one of the few developing countries where the railway is not in decline but, on the contrary, is even growing within local financial capabilities. The country is intersected with 63,000 kilometers (40,000 mi) of railway lines, which transport goods as well as 11 million passengers per day, plus a considerable number of those who ride without a ticket on the roof. Travelling in the economy class is a great experience on its own. You must not hurry as delays of several hours are nothing out of the ordinary.



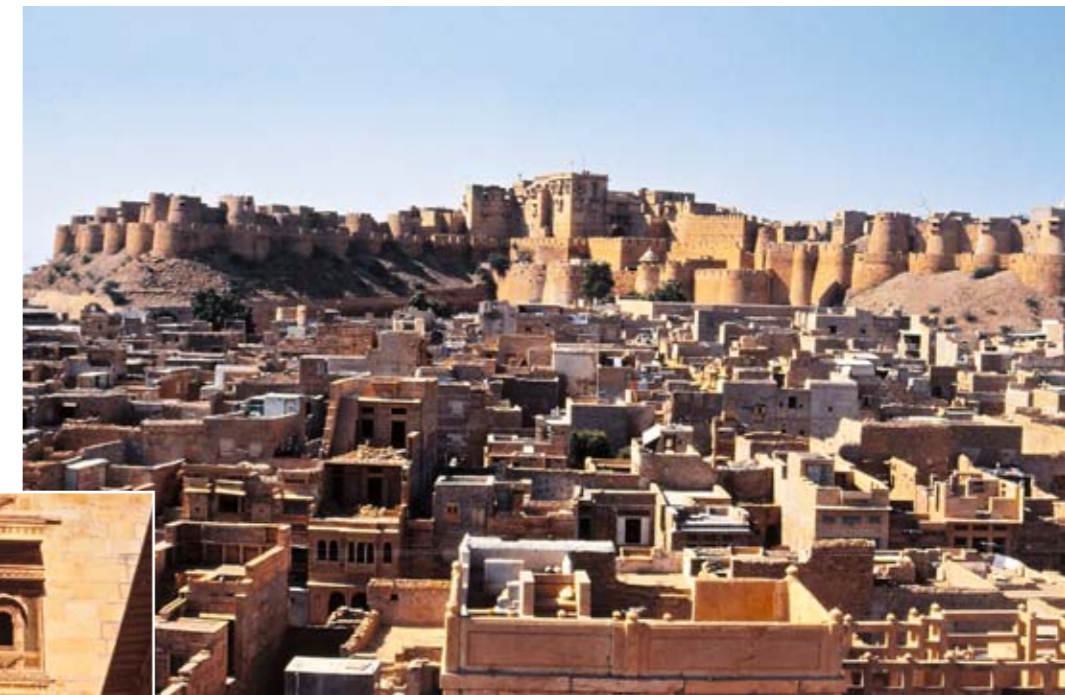


Jaipur (4 million inhabitants) in Rajasthan is dominated by the Palace of Winds (Hawa Mahal), built as the residence of the palace women.

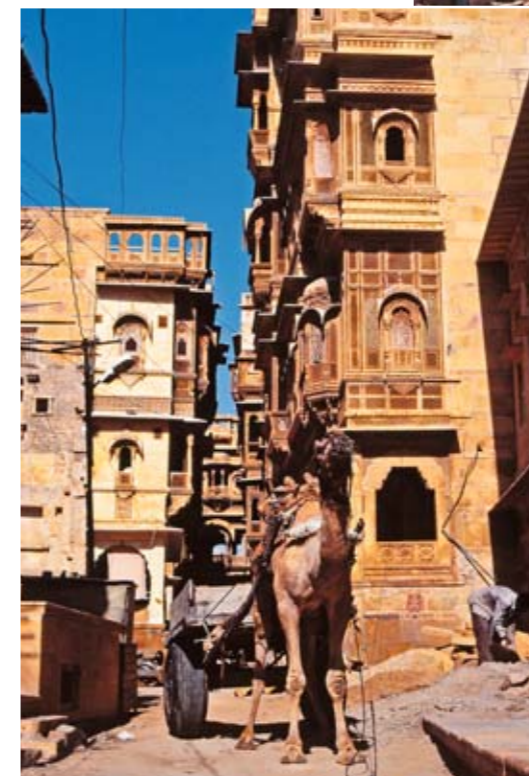


Udaipur, also called "the City of Lakes" is a pleasant place to be (only half a million inhabitants). It used to be the capital of the then powerful Hindu empire Mewar, which was established in 734. The legendary figure of the empire was Bappa Rawal, a warrior who fought the Muslim invaders. The photo shows the dominant feature of the city, the 800-meter-(2,625 ft) long, well-maintained City Palace.

Not far from Jaipur there is one of the oldest cities in India, the Hindu town of Pushkar with 15,000 inhabitants. It lies on the shore of a sacred lake. Usually it exudes tranquility. When I was visiting, it was none too quiet as there was a demonstration against the privatization of a telecommunication company. This young woman in the nearby temple would not let it disturb her concentrated reading of Hindu texts.

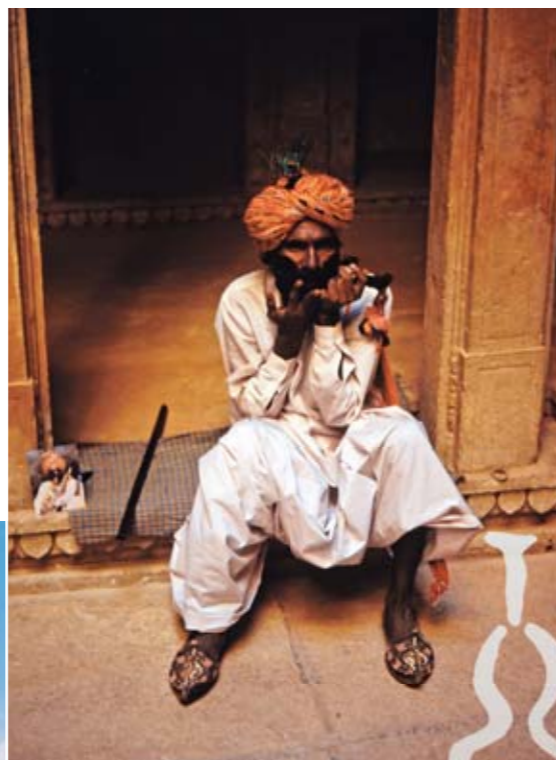


Jaisalmer, a city with 80,000 inhabitants, is located in the Thar Desert, near the border with Pakistan. In the past it was an important stopping-place for camel caravans that travelled through the desert. We can see here a number of multi-story houses built of yellow sandstone for wealthy merchants. The location set in the desert looks very exotic, thanks to which it served as a setting for, for example, One Thousand and One Nights.



This man reportedly has the world's longest mustache, which is over two meters long and so he has to wear it wound around his head. For a small fee he is happy to let you take a photo.

Mumbai is the largest and richest city in India. Officially it has 12.5 million inhabitants, but count in the adjacent, densely populated regions and the population will approach twenty million. The most famous monument is the Gateway of India, formerly used as an orientation point for ships arriving in the port.



Although Mumbai is the richest city, it does not mean that its streets and the pier are not lined with groups of beggars. Wealth is distributed extremely unevenly, so that globalization and economic growth have more losers than winners here.



Numerous Christian missionary orders operate in the poorest areas, trying, among other things, to give children at least some education and teach them crafts. Unfortunately, given the number of local residents they are just drops in the ocean. In addition, Christian orders are not very welcome in India as the Indian government sees them as competition for the Hindu faith.

This, too, is what the present Mumbai and other cities look like: a beautiful coastline completely devastated with rubbish, among which the poorest look for anything that could still be made some use of. While in the past the waste was prevalently organic and would decompose quickly, today the majority of rubbish is plastics, which become an ecological problem as they take many, many decades to disintegrate.

I was in Bombay in 1994, when an epidemic of bubonic plague broke out in Surat and spread like wildfire to other cities. Bubonic plague is caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. It is transmitted to humans by fleas that have contracted the bacterium from an infected rodent, usually a rat. This is the reason why we will never get rid of plague, because we will never be able to exterminate the carrier. The most effective prevention is therefore good sanitary conditions. When the plague spread in India, people bought antibiotics from pharmacies and took them in large doses, which was especially dangerous for children and pregnant women. Despite the fact that the epidemic got out of the government's control, not more than 3,000 people became infected and only about fifty victims died, mostly poor, malnourished and therefore weakened individuals.

India is a beautiful country, alas full of contrasts. During my stay I could not help noticing these village women, who are carrying firewood to cook meals for their families and for warmth in the evening. At a density of 361 inhabitants per square kilometer (954 per sq mi), it is no wonder that forests and trees in general are disappearing rapidly. The poor cannot be blamed because we would do the same in their situation. In 1972 at the first UN conference on the human environment the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi said: "Poverty is the biggest polluter".

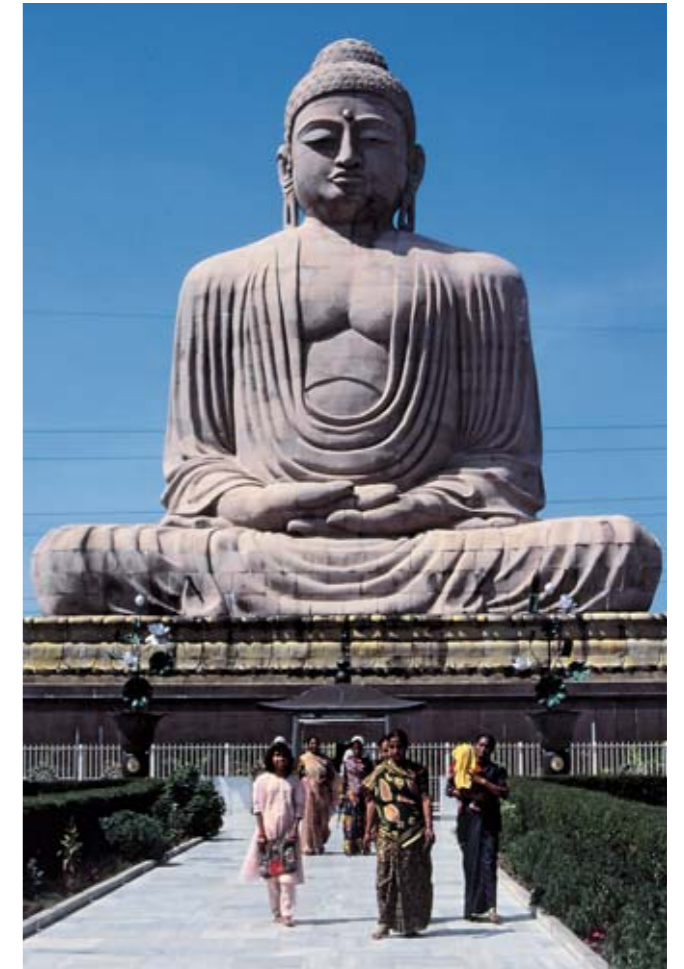




Gandhi's statement applies today as much as it did forty years ago. This child will not go to school; malnutrition will likely limit his physical and mental development. He will therefore be unable to develop his creative potential, and his life will not as fulfilled as it could and should be.

Situated on the banks of the River Ganges, Varanasi (3.5 million inhabitants) is the holiest Hindu site. It is constantly flooded with pilgrims because it is believed that every Hindu should visit the city at least once in their lifetime. Many Hindus also come here to die as this may bring them closer to freeing themselves from the cycle of birth and death (reincarnation). Since the body of the deceased is burnt and the ashes scattered into the sacred Ganges, wood becomes a problem. It is scarce and expensive.

The photo shows pilgrims at sunrise taking a purifying bath in the Ganges. When I saw the quality of the water, there was no chance I would ever get into it. It is surprising that infectious diseases do not spread like wildfire in these conditions. The well-known "thy faith hath made thee whole" probably works here. 2,500 years ago Varanasi was visited by the Buddha, making it sacred for Buddhists, too. In contrast, the Muslims destroyed the city again and again.



*Both Gaya is one of the four holiest places of Buddhism. This is where Gautama Buddha meditated and obtained enlightenment (bodhi). He became the Buddha, the awakened, the enlightened. Buddhists believe that it happened under this Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*).*





Not far from the small village of Khajuraho in the state of Madhya Pradesh lies a complex of Hindu and Jain temples built between the 10th and 12th centuries. They became known mainly because of a large number of sculptures depicting various erotic positions. Some statues are life-size, while others are tiny (see the one rupee coin for comparison). Khajuraho was once known as the city of Shiva statues, the statues probably tell about the wedding of Shiva and Parvati. Shiva is one of the major Hindu deities, the destroyer of the universe. This, however, is not viewed as negative. Death is not the ultimate end of everything and the universe is destroyed so that it can be created again. Besides Shiva the main Hindu gods include Brahma – the creator of the universe – and Vishnu – the preserver of the universe. Parvati, a Hindu goddess and wife of Lord Shiva, embodies the feminine creative energy that actively participates in the existence of the entire universe. The place thus shows the culmination of the wedding and at the same time the highest possible spiritual experience. According to Hinduism, during love-making and sexual intercourse all senses act together to achieve a complete physical and mental unity.

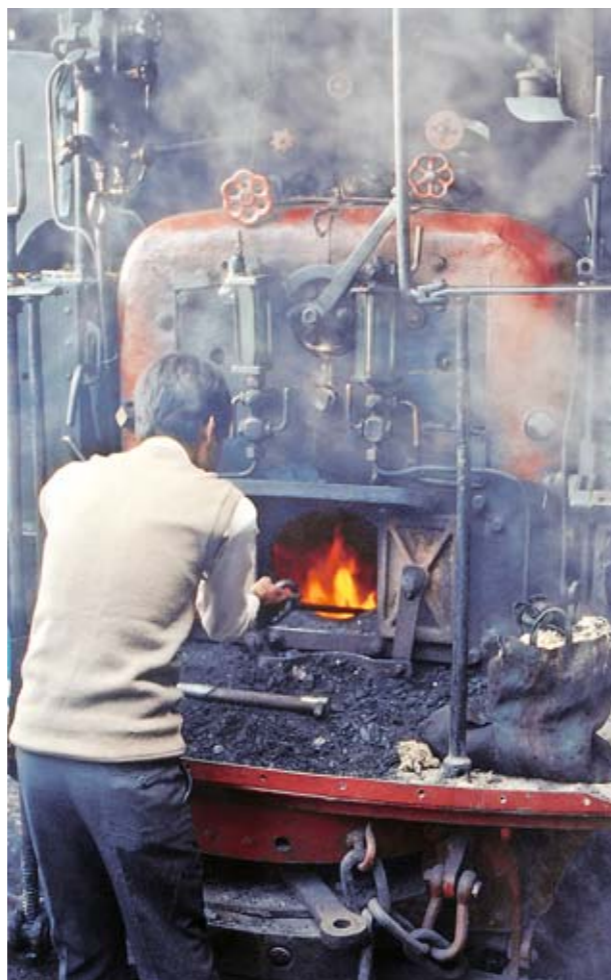
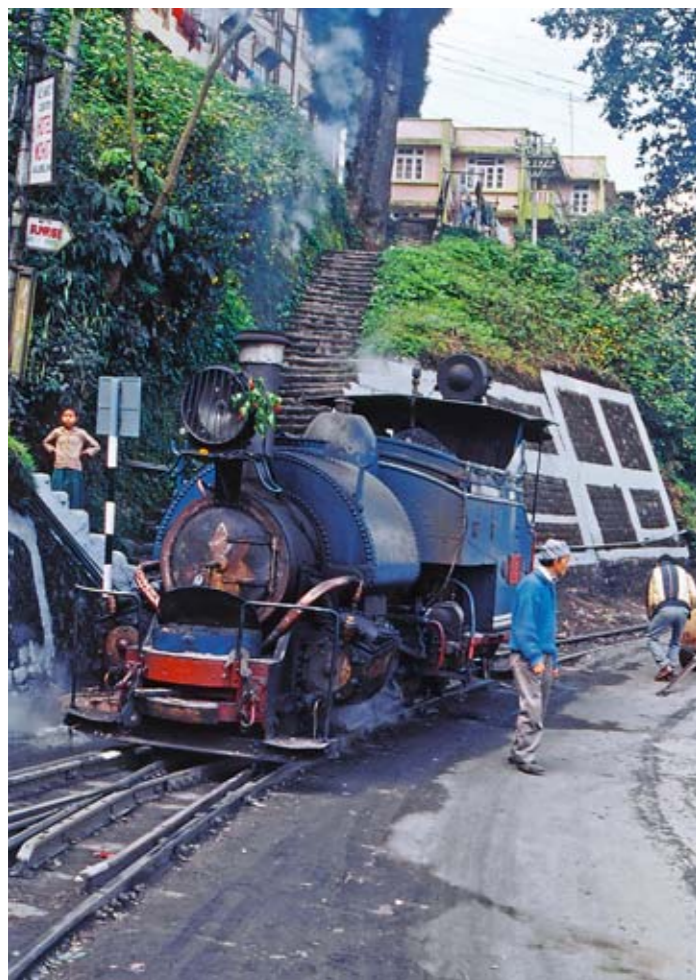


Kolkata is the third most populous city in India, with the entire metropolitan area having approximately 19 million inhabitants. It is the capital of West Bengal, and the Bengalis consider themselves the intellectual elite of India. Until 1931 it was also the capital of the British Raj. This is reflected in the architecture, which was to give a majestic impression.

There is also another face to Kolkata – a decaying city with high levels of poverty, especially in the suburban, slum areas. After the declaration of independence in 1947 a wave of Hindu refugees arrived from the newly created Muslim East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh). In 1965 the country was flooded with a second wave of migrants as a result of the Indo-Pakistan war; and a third wave came in 1972 as the outcome of the Pakistan-Bangladesh war. Kolkata has not recovered yet, and indeed I would hate to be in charge of the city's zoning plan. On the other hand, as a result of these disasters charity has developed here considerably. This solidarity is symbolized by Mother Teresa and her nuns.

Not far from Kolkata the shores of the Indian subcontinent are washed by the Indian Ocean. Fishermen in their villages live almost the same way as a hundred or more years ago. Villagers also still use the same "flush toilet" – they open their bowels on the coast and within 12 hours the tide takes care of everything.





After the long journey around India it is time for a change, preferably by heading for the mountains: a pleasant climate, wonderful scenery and not many people. You can get from Kolkata to Darjeeling (110 thousand inhabitants), lying 2,000 meters (7,000 ft) above sea level, by a train that runs along a unique narrow gauge mountain railway from Siliguri. The railway is nicknamed the Toy Train. I am convinced that these machines and the way they are operated are the same as in colonial times.

Most locals and tourists prefer bus transportation. True, you must not expect safety regulations are observed here as carefully as in Europe. Fortunately no one drove us up onto the roof of the bus; it was only our luggage that ended up there, with us hoping it would not be stolen on the way. We were lucky, it always arrived safe.



Darjeeling, also known as the Queen of Hills, is famous chiefly for its tea plantations. Most of the inhabitants of the city and the surrounding region are Gurkhas, who would like to become independent of West Bengal and create Gurkhaland. In the past, Darjeeling was a popular holiday destination for the British colonists, who were seeking refuge from the grueling heat and humidity in the lowland areas.



The eastern Himalayas feature several beautiful hiking trails, of which I can highly recommend the six-day Sandakphu (named after the 3,636-meter-(11,929 ft) high mountain). On a clear day (usually in the morning and evening) you will see the main Himalayan ridge with its three 8,000-meter (26,247 ft) peaks in the distance – Mount Everest (8,850 meters [29,029 ft]), Lhotse (8,516 meters [27,940 ft]) and Makalu (8,462 meters [27,766 ft]). Much closer, only about thirty kilometers away, is another 8,000-meter mountain, the highest in India and the third highest in the world, Kanchenjunga (8,586 meters [28,169 ft]).



The Himalayas separate the Indian subcontinent from the Tibetan plateau. They stretch from Pakistan through China, India and Nepal to Bhutan. About 50 million years ago the Indian Plate collided with the Eurasian Plate and began sliding underneath the latter. The rising of the Eurasian Plate triggered off the formation of the mountain massifs of the Himalayas and the Karakoram. This process continues even today, making Everest every year about a millimeter higher.

These are natural processes of unimaginable force, which should make us feel respect and reverence for nature. If such natural beauty fails to make someone pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, they are as good as dead, and as Albert Einstein put it "[their] eyes are closed."

5.4 Thailand

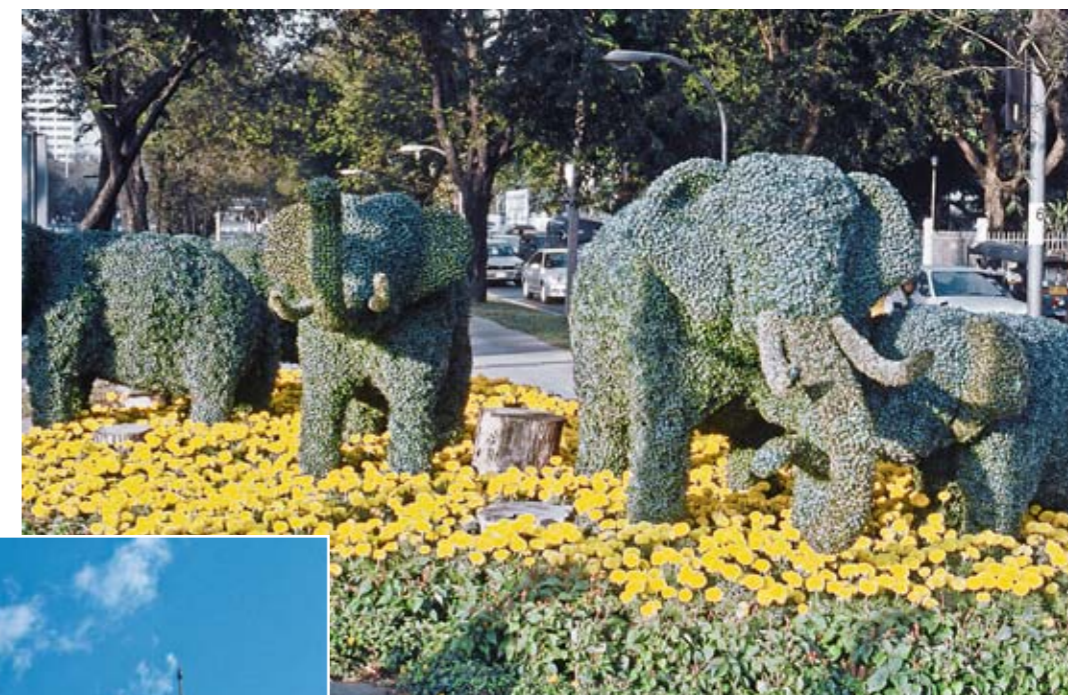
The majority of Thailand, or the Kingdom of Thailand to be more precise, lies in the central part of the Indochina peninsula and partly extends to the Malay Peninsula. It covers 513,000 square kilometers and has 66 million people. As early as 1238 the kingdom separated itself from the Khmer Empire. Thai means "freedom", and indeed, through skilful diplomacy, territorial concessions and reforms, Siam (the former name of the Kingdom of Thailand) managed to maintain its independence even from the colonial powers of Britain and France, which entered the region in the 19th century. Today, Thailand is a constitutional monarchy and King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), who ascended the throne in 1946, is currently the longest reigning monarch in the world.

The dominant religion of Thailand is Buddhism, with Islam being strong in the very south.

I visited Thailand only very briefly in 2004 on my way to Bhutan. I am not familiar with the renowned beaches, the destination of most tourists. The two days I had in Thailand while on my way to Bhutan I spent by getting to know Bangkok, the capital.

Bangkok (the City of Angels) with its five million inhabitants suffers from poor air quality, caused by the excessive motor traffic. The city lies on the Chao Phraya River, which is an important arterial road. Until the late 18th century Bangkok was just a coastal village near the Gulf of Thailand. This changed in 1782, when King Rama I (founder of the dynasty that is now in power) made it the capital.

Probably all "backpackers", that is, people who try to travel as cheaply as possible, are familiar with Khaosan Road. Filled with cheap hotels, it is very lively day and night.



In the city center, right next to a busy arterial road, the gardeners have gone a bit wild. They probably wanted, at least a little, to evoke for both the locals and tourists the illusion of nature, or rather a memory of it.

Bangkok is famous mainly for its temples. Of these, one of the most attractive and popular must be Wat Phra Kaew, which forms part of the Grand Palace. The temple conceals the most sacred symbol of Thailand – the Emerald Buddha.



Covering 94.5 hectares, the Grand Palace includes more than 100 historic buildings that represent 200 years of the history of the current royal dynasty. Visitors can see here depictions of demons, which guard the temple and the palace.



Wat Pho, the oldest and largest temple in Bangkok, is known as the "Temple of the Reclining Buddha". It houses the largest collection of the representations of Buddha. The temple is one of the oldest educational centers. Today it serves as, among other things, a center for the preservation and education of traditional Thai medicine and massage.



5.5 Bhutan

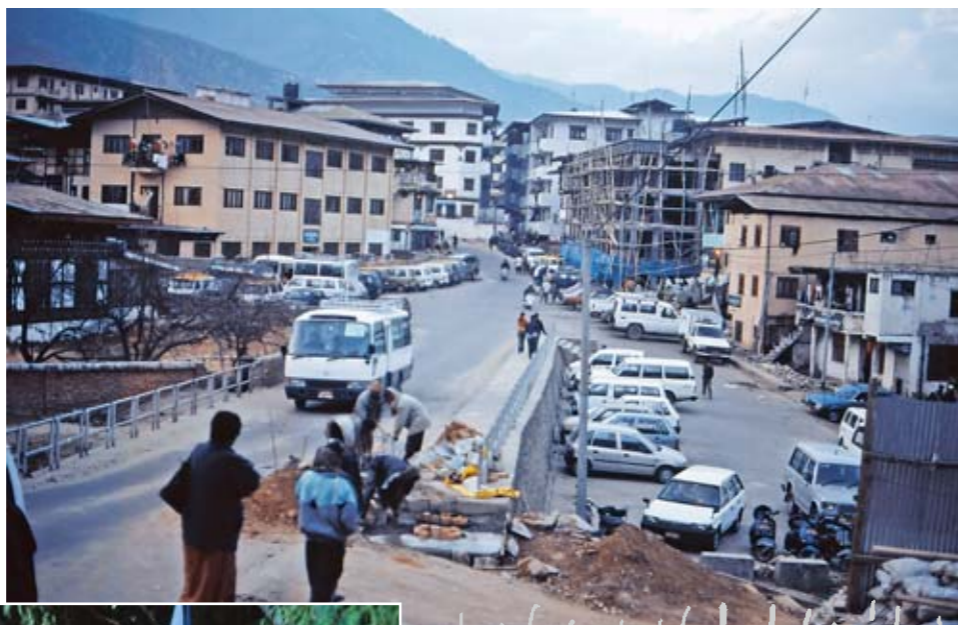
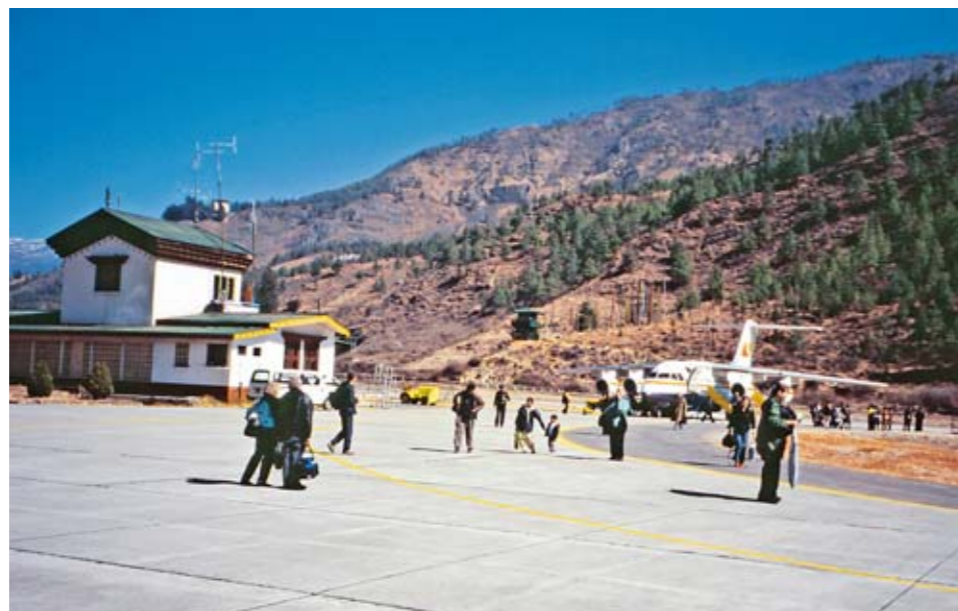
It is not easy to visit Bhutan. The country is accessible only by air and only with the Druk Air Bhutan airlines, which at the time of my visit in 2004 owned but two small airliners. The only airport in the country, Paro, located about 50 kilometers (31 mi) from the capital Thimphu, is accessible only from Delhi and Kolkata, India, from Kathmandu, Nepal or from Bangkok, Thailand. In addition to this, Indians can use two land border crossings. As there is no competition from other airlines, the ticket is expensive. A return from Bangkok to Paro cost \$750. A visa costs 200 dollars for each day of the stay. That is why at the beginning of the 21st century the country was visited by not more than 5,000 to 7,000 tourists a year, while now it is around 30,000 tourists.

For Asia, Bhutan is a small country (47,000 square kilometers [38,000 sq mi]) with an equally small population (700,000). Fifty percent of the territory lies at over 3,000 meters above sea level, even though the lowest point in the south of the country is only 100 meters above sea level. The highest mountain, Kulha Gangri, rises 7,554 meters above sea level.

Thimphu, the capital with its 50,000 inhabitants, is situated at an altitude of 2,320 meters and yet the climatic conditions are not dramatic because the city is on the 27th parallel north, just like, for example, Miami, Florida.

The city and the whole country are gradually opening up to the world and globalization, even though back in 1998 it was still prohibited to watch foreign television networks. The Internet has been available since 2000, but only for those who can afford it, that is, the members of the royal court and the local elite. It is a great mystery what opening itself up to the world will do with a country that was still living in the Middle Ages only half a century ago. What comes first and most aggressively with opening up to the world are the negative phenomena – alcoholism, tiresome advertising, violence in movies, an uncontrolled increase in the use of cars, and so on. Only later comes economic development, better education, and other achievements of modern life.

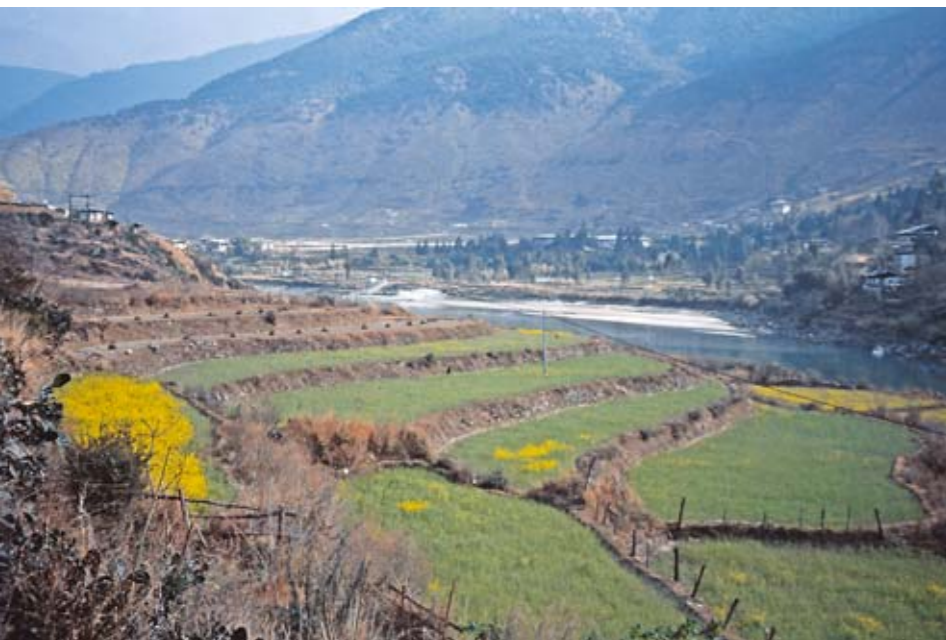
Archery is historically a national sport in Bhutan (although the bows are very modern; these members of the royal court have brought them from abroad). Until the mid-20th century, Bhutan was an isolated country. Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, who was educated in India and Great Britain, ascended the throne only in 1952, following the death of his father. He established the National Assembly in 1953 and abolished serfdom in 1956 (!). Bhutan became a UN member in 1971.



The king died young, at the age of 44. He was succeeded by his 16-year-old son Jigme Singye Wangchuk, who began to gradually open the country up to the world. He also came up with an alternative proposal for measuring the country's development. In addition to the gross domestic product (GDP), which measures economic performance, Bhutan also monitors the gross national happiness. The trouble is, of course, that the happiness of an individual or society is difficult to measure because it is a matter of subjective experience and perception. It is nevertheless possible to measure (at least to some extent) the preconditions that determine whether one is living a happy life. For example, a healthy and educated person has a higher chance of living a happier life than a person who is sick and uneducated.

Gross domestic product measures the performance of the economy but does not measure the 'externalities', especially in terms of the environment. For example, if an oil rig disaster causes damage, the repairing of which will cost tens of billions of dollars, it affects economic growth positively and not negatively, while in fact the disaster has harmed and not benefited the society. That is why now the world is witnessing a whole series of attempts to create alternative indicators to GDP. This was the theme of the largest conference in Bhutan to date (2004), to which I was invited. The participants included 300 locals and 80 foreign experts.

Bhutan is a Buddhist country. These flags are to protect the local residents from evil spirits. Most of the territory, except for high mountain areas, is covered by forests. Jigme Singye Wangchuk paid a great deal of attention to forest protection, nature conservation and the environment. Bhutan resists the high pressure of foreign investors and developers, who would like to spend hundreds of millions of dollars covering the country with hotels and golf courses. Fortunately, they have not had any success yet.



Only 8% of Bhutan's territory is farmed. Another 6% is used for grazing. Three quarters of the population are small farmers who work very hard to barely make a self-sufficient living. They cultivate small terraced fields on sloping areas. Most land in the country is nevertheless owned by large-scale farmers and lama monasteries. It would be highly advisable to implement a land reform, as is the case with many other developing countries.

The best known monastery in the country is Punakha, a former center of education and the winter seat of the king. Until 1955 it was also the seat of government and Punakha was the capital, but then the administrative center was moved to Thimphu. As Punakha lies only 1,200 meters (5,000 ft) above sea level, the winters are mild and the summers hot. For those who visit Bhutan, Punakha is the most popular tourist destination.



Following centuries of absolute monarchy in Bhutan, the first democratic elections were held in March 2008. In December 2005 the king announced his intention to abdicate and hand over the rule to his son, who was to continue opening the country up to the world and especially carry on with the gradual democratization of the country. And so he did. The popular king abdicated after 34 years of rule in December 2006 aged 51 (he was no gray beard but a man in his prime). Taking over, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck was officially crowned king in November 2008, at the age of 28. In July of the same year the country adopted a constitution and became a constitutional monarchy. The preparation of the text of the constitution took seven years and the outcome is based on Buddhist philosophy and on the Declaration of Human Rights. A comparative analysis of twenty modern constitutions was carried out and in terms of human rights Bhutan was mainly inspired by the South African Constitution, which copes with the apartheid heritage.

Let us wish the new king and the whole country good luck and wise decisions on the path to democracy and modernization. Bhutan is a poor but beautiful country with warm-hearted people, as I could see for myself. If they succeed, small but proud Bhutan could become an inspiration for many other developing countries. Today's world is in dire need of some such an example of success.



5.6 Singapore



Singapore is one of the smallest countries in the world. Covering only 710 square kilometers (274 sq mi), the island of the same name and 54 adjacent islets are home to nearly five million inhabitants. The population density reaches almost 7,000 inhabitants per square kilometer (16,800 per sq mi)! A lion head (called the Merlion) represents the city, the name of which is derived from Sanskrit and means "Lion City". As a Malay legend has it, long ago this place was visited by a prince from Sumatra. He saw a strange creature foreign to this region – a lion. Understanding it as a good sign, the prince founded a settlement in this place, which he named the "Lion City".

Most of the population are ethnic Chinese (77%). There is a much smaller representation of Malaysians (14%), Indians (8%), with other ethnic groups amounting to only one percent. The official languages are Chinese, Malay and English.



Of the country's inhabitants, 43% are Buddhists, 15% Muslims, and 8% Taoists. Only 4% of the population follow Hinduism (the picture shows a Hindu temple), while 5% are Catholics, 10% of the population adheres to other Christian churches, and 15% are non-religious. With such ethnic and religious diversity people have to learn to live tolerantly, and Singapore is quite a good example.

Singapore has a good strategic location (in the past from the perspective of sea transport and today it is also an airline hub with one of the most modern airports in the world) and as early as 1867 it became a British colony. In February 1942 the island was conquered by the Japanese, which was very humiliating for the British. After the war the British returned, but Singapore was already gradually heading for independence. In the early 1960s the British supported its integration into a newly established state, Malaysia. This was achieved in 1963, but the "marriage" lasted only two years, mainly because the Malays were afraid of the growing influence of the ethnic Chinese, who make up the majority of Singaporeans. It is thus unusual that Singapore became an independent republic in 1965 somewhat involuntarily. The photo shows the National History Museum.



From the end of World War II until the early 1970s Singapore was a poor country with a high unemployment rate, ideal conditions for the Communist Party of Malaysia. The fact that Singapore did not become another Cambodia or Vietnam, is largely due to Lee Kuan Yew – a great figure in Singapore’s modern history. This lawyer graduated from Cambridge in 1954, and co-founded the People’s Action Party, becoming its Secretary General. In 1959 he was appointed the first prime minister. When in 1965, after having been expelled from the Malaysian Federation, the disoriented Singapore looked for a new identity and a path into the future, Lee Kuan Yew began building a modern industrial (today already post-industrial) state.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Singapore became one of the four Asian tigers (together with Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea) and by the end of the 20th century it had successfully completed its transformation from a poor developing country into a developed and relatively rich one. This did, however, not come free. First, during the industrialization of the island the environment suffered, and secondly the government put significant restrictions on the citizens’ freedoms and suppressed a large number of human rights. Surveillance cameras were and still are installed almost everywhere in public places, the freedom of the press was limited, and the opponents of the regime whom the government considered dangerous were put in prison. In addition, there are the well-known (for us almost exotic) bans on smoking and chewing in the street, or corporal punishment (although it may actually be the most efficient and educational punishment in the case of petty crime). However, successful economic growth helped the overall political stability in the country.

Lee Kuan Yew, often called the “Father of modern Singapore”, resigned from the post of prime minister in 1990, when he was 67. He has written an interesting autobiography aptly called “From Third World to First: The Singapore Story”.

One of the peculiarities of Singapore is that it has a very strong army considering the circumstances. This secular state is surrounded by much larger Islamic neighbors, which was the main reason why Singapore requested Israel’s cooperation in military consultancy the year the country was established. As is the case with Israel, because of the country’s small size, the only effective defense against attack from outside is a preventive strike on the enemy’s territory. Let us hope that this will never have to happen.

In the photo there are the ruins of the Siloso colonial military fort on the island of Sentosa. During the war it was used by the Japanese as a POW camp.



When the city-state of Singapore grew rich, people gradually began to realize the importance nature and the environment had for the quality of their life. The main problems include the industrial pollution of air and water, limited water resources, problems with waste storage (due to the lack of suitable sites), and emissions caused by seasonal fires in Indonesia, where farmers burn forests to acquire new soil.

As Singapore is located in the humid tropics, the vegetation is very lush. However, because there are too many people with their attendant activities, it is vulnerable, as are the coastal areas with the fragile ecosystems of coral reefs. No wonder then that you will often come across billboards saying “Let’s protect our environment”, “No littering”, and so on.



5.7. China

Since 1949, there have actually been two Chinas: the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China, known as Taiwan. Let us have a brief look at the first, communist China. Its total area of 9.597 million square kilometers makes it the fourth largest country in the world. With a population of 1.3 billion people, it is the world's most populous country.

Of the total area, China has however only 16% of agricultural land, which is a big problem.

The capital Beijing is an urban agglomeration with 14 million inhabitants. The growing use of cars is one of the symbols of the country's industrialization. Now about every seventieth person owns a car. It is hard to guess what it would be like if every second or third person had a car, as is the case with the most developed countries.

On 1 October 1949, following a civil war between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalists (the Kuomintang), Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China on Tiananmen Square. Since then his portrait has hung there, despite the fact that his reign claimed tens of millions of human lives, and like Stalin in the Soviet Union, he "waded knee-deep in blood". The present official opinion of Mao is that he was 30% wrong and 70% right. Many simple Chinese still believe he was a great man who deserves respect.

The Gate of Heavenly Peace stands close to the world's largest square, Tiananmen Square, the site of the bloodily suppressed 1989 student protests against communism.

Not far from Tiananmen Square lies the Forbidden City – the seat of the emperors of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), which was closed to the public for over 500 years. Nowadays it is the largest complex of preserved ancient buildings in China.



I found it hard to understand that right in such a center of admirable history and Chinese civilization the administrators of the complex would place refreshments with Coca-Cola tables and parasols.



The ancient streets, called hutongs, are gradually disappearing, being pushed out by modern development. Their destruction accelerated mainly in connection with the 2008 Olympic Games.

The Chinese government made the Olympic Games into a huge promotional event. The photos depict the central stadium designed in the form of a bird's nest.

The great advantage of the Games was that many streets in the city were provided with their English names and with information signs. As part of the Games a "Toilet Revolution" took place, significantly improving the quality of public toilets, at least in Beijing.







Another Olympic stadium, in 2007 still under construction.



Although China is a communist and therefore officially atheist country, various religions do have their influence here. These include above all Taoism, Confucianism (more of a philosophy than a religion) and Buddhism. The photos show the Lama Temple in Beijing, richly decorated and the best preserved temple of Tibetan Buddhism in the world.



Another religion is Islam, especially in the western areas of China. It is reported that 2-3% of the Chinese population are active Muslims. That is quite a lot. In absolute terms this represents approximately 30-40 million Muslims and these official figures may still be greatly underestimated. Furthermore, there are three million Catholics and four million Protestants in China (the figures may again be underestimated). Recently, the number of Christians in the spiritually starved country has grown, which is giving the rulers a headache. The picture shows St. Joseph's Cathedral in Beijing, built as early as 1655.



About 110 kilometers (68 mi) northeast of Beijing you can visit the Great Wall of China at Simatai. Unlike other sections open to tourists, here the wall looks authentic, free of any concrete "improvements". From here you can take a ten-kilometer hike, a bit challenging due to the elevation. Worse than the physical effort itself were the importunate vendors on the first leg of the journey, who were so agile in constantly forcing various ridiculous souvenirs on us. I felt sorry for them because I understood it was the source of their livelihood, but the intrusiveness of some of them made me feel very uncomfortable.

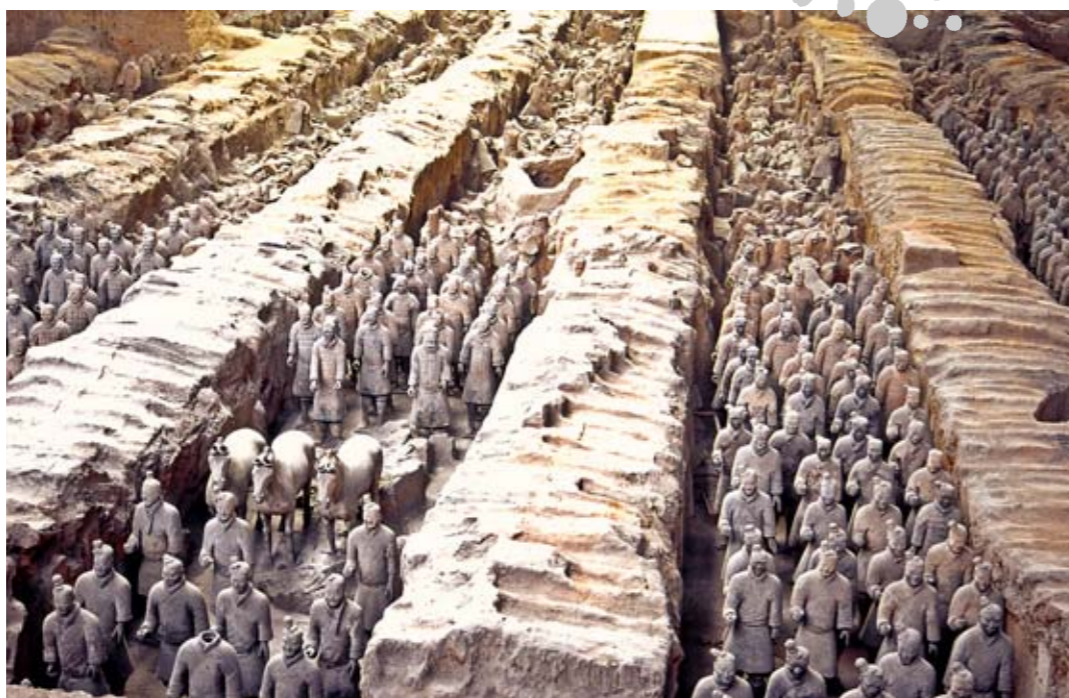
The Great Wall of China is a symbol of the historical China. Its construction began during the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC). Its present look comes from the times of the Ming Dynasty, from the late 14th century until the early 17th century. The fortification system stretches across northern China for 5,000 kilometers.





The landscape around Simatai. Each piece of even steeply sloping land is farmed to the maximum.

Near the town of Xi'an (almost 7 million inhabitants), the end point of the historical Silk Road, there is one of the most important archaeological discoveries of the 20th century, the Terracotta Army. It was only discovered in 1974 when farmers digging a well fell into an ancient hall. It is actually the mausoleum of a Qin emperor dating to the 3rd century BC. The archeologists found a total of 8,000 terracotta sculptures of soldiers and horses that formed the guard of an ancient imperial city. Emperor Cheng, ruler of the State of Qin, began building his own tomb while still alive. He allegedly used the skills of 700,000 people from all over the country for the construction, which took nearly 40 years. The tomb contains the bodies of 500 people who accompanied the deceased emperor. Likewise, the builders of the tomb are buried here.



Travel 120 kilometers (75 mi) east of Xi'an to replace the overcrowded Chinese cities with mountains. Here you will find the Flower Mountain (Hua-Shan), a place of pilgrimage that is one of the five sacred mountains of Taoism. It consists of five granite peaks resembling a flower, of which the highest, the southern peak, rises 2,160 meters above sea level. The peaks are linked by the Green Dragon Ridge.

The Chongqing agglomeration is considered the most industrial area of southwest China, which is reflected in the poor quality of the air, which deteriorates even more in the summer months, when the temperature often climbs above 40 degrees Celsius in the shade. The city lies at the confluence of two rivers. The smaller Jialing empties into the mighty Yangtze River, the longest in Asia and third longest in the world (6,418 kilometers []). Tourists usually set out from Chongqing on a three-day cruise through the valley of the Three Gorges.

You can go down the river either on an expensive and comfortable cruise ship designed for foreign tourists or on a boat the locals use. I recommend the latter. I opted for the second class (out of four), and yet there were four of us in a very small cabin. The Chinese apparently love being together. Every day early in the morning the speakers would play music – a wake-up call. Afterwards we had breakfast together and then a free program ensued, consisting primarily of the observations of the landscape passing by. Some would use this to eat and drink heartily, ending up half seas over.





The first part of the ride between Chongqing and Yichang, the destination, does not run through a very pleasant environment. It is the price the Chinese pay for rash industrial development that disrespects environmental principles. Factories smoke like the Eastern European ones did in the 1950s. Prefabricated housing was also a common sight in socialism. Here, however, buildings and flats are even more closely crammed together than back in, let us say, the communist Czechoslovakia.



China uses mainly coal to produce electricity. This causes a great number of problems related to the environment and the release of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas. In 2006, China overtook the United States in total carbon dioxide emissions and is now the largest polluter in the world. Here coal is being loaded on cargo ships.



The first night on the boat. The sun is setting over the landscape, which is not too mountainous yet. This is to change the next day.



The Valley of the Three Gorges was shaped by water erosion over millions of years, when the river was making its way through the landscape from the Tibetan plateau to the ocean in the east. Due to the construction of Three Gorges Dam the valley has been flooded up to a height of 175 meters (574 ft). When I was visiting (spring 2007) the water level had been raised by 150 meters, with another 25 meters still waiting to be filled.





All the three gorges combined reach a length of nearly 120 kilometers. Qutang Gorge measures not more than 8 kilometers (5 mi), Wu Gorge 45 kilometers (28 mi), and the last down the river, Xiling Gorge, is 66 kilometers (41 mi) long.



The landscape is gradually opening and we are approaching the dam. Note the plots along the bank, farmed despite their very steep slopes.



As the river is a major transportation artery, one of the reasons for building the dam was to improve its navigation during the year. Even before its completion, 70% of all river traffic in China took place on this mighty body of water.

After less than three days the ride is nearly over. We still need to visit the dam and learn about its construction.

The dam is 2,309 meters (7,660 ft) long and 185 meters (607 ft) high. The lake it has formed is 660 kilometers (410 mi) in length and 1.1 kilometers (0.7 mi) in width. An area the size of Singapore has been flooded. It is the largest Chinese project since the construction of the Great Wall, with the costs totaling \$75 billion. Twenty six turbines were installed in the dam, each with an output of 700 megawatts. The total output is 18,200 MW, a performance nine times higher than that of the Czech Temelin nuclear power plant. In the future it will be possible to add another six more turbines, which will boost the overall performance to the final 22,500 MW. While the generation of electricity for energy-hungry China was the main motive behind the construction, another purpose was to avoid the risk of flooding. Within the past 100 years the Yangtze River has killed one million people. This is probably the main reason why most Chinese supported the construction; the only entities against the idea were small groups of environmental activists and foreign non-governmental environmental organizations. As far as I know, the prevalent feeling in China was that of "we'll finally tame the unpredictable element".

Construction of the dam has a number of negative features. Besides being expensive, two million people were moved away, losing their homes. 8,000 sites important from the archeological point of view were flooded. If the dam broke (as was the case with two dams in the 1975 earthquake in the province of Henan, which claimed 230,000 lives), in Yichang alone up to 4.8 million people would die within an hour. Further down the river there live 200 million people who could also fall victim to floods. Now the dam is completed, the Chinese are afraid of landslides into the reservoir. That could trigger a huge wave that would spill over the dam.

More importantly, the dam can also become a "cesspool" because inside there is still water with not enough oxygen. Above the dam there are 40 large cities and 400 factories that discharge pollution into the river. This provides ideal conditions for putrescent processes to start in the reservoir.

For a long time the Chinese considered the construction a symbol of their leap into modern times. The official opinion today is much more reserved. The future will tell if it was the proponents or the opponents of the construction who were right.







Yichang is a city of four million located 40 kilometers below the dam. Like many other cities, it is booming and new buildings and entire neighborhoods are popping up like mushrooms.

While walking around the city one suddenly bumps into a familiar car. Similar to almost all major auto-makers in the world, Skoda too is pushing into the Chinese market because it saw and has seized an opportunity that may not come around any time soon again – more than one billion people would love to own a car.



Suddenly the sky clouds over and darkens. It is not a regular storm coming but a sand storm. It is fascinating to watch from behind the windows of the train, but I would not want to be outside. The sand from these storms torments the Beijing residents on a regular basis, but there have been cases where a cloud of sand has crossed the Pacific Ocean in the upper atmosphere and appeared on the west coast of North America.



Taking the Mongolian branch of the Trans-Siberian Railway we travel from Beijing to Ulan Bator. The journey takes one and a half days. We are heading north and the landscape becomes more mountainous, but also drier.



At the Sino-Mongolian border the landscape turns into a desert; we are driving through a part of the Gobi. Stretching over 1.3 million square kilometers, it is the northernmost desert in the world. The problem is that it is expanding towards the south and nobody knows how to stop this process.



5.8 Mongolia

Although Mongolia covers 1,560,000 square kilometers, it has only 2.7 million inhabitants. This makes the density one of the lowest in the world, a mere 1.8 inhabitants per square kilometer! The capital, Ulan Bator, has a population of 850,000 and is constantly increasing, as people migrate from rural areas into cities.

Here, in the middle of Asia, one is happy to see Czech buses, Karosa, at the end of their service lives. From time to time you bump into a person who speaks Czech because under socialism many Mongolians studied in Czechoslovakia. The Ulan Bator drivers are the worst I have ever seen though. In the past men would compete on horseback and today they show off in their cars: crossing the street, even if on a crossing, is an adrenaline sport. Even at places with traffic lights, you cannot rely on the fact that the pedestrian will have the right of way on green.



This statue of Lenin is still standing in the city center. In 1691 Mongolia was conquered by the Chinese, and it was not until 1911 that it declared independence. However, in 1919 it was occupied again. With the help of Russia, the Mongols regained independence in 1921 and in 1924, supported by the Russians, or the Soviet Union to be precise, the Mongolian People's Republic was established, the second socialist country in the world. Although the country went through forced collectivization of agriculture and the demolition of Buddhist temples, we cannot say the Mongols would have a negative attitude to the Russians. Historically they see China as a threat, and Russia is for them someone who will help them hold the Chinese influence back. That is why I believe that Lenin's statue will not disappear anytime soon.

The greatest figure in Mongolian history is undoubtedly Genghis Khan. He built the Mongol Empire, which existed during the 13th and 14th century. It was the largest empire in history. At its greatest flowering it occupied 33 million square kilometers (12 mil sq mi) (22% of the land area) and ruled approximately 100 million people.

It was established in 1206, when Genghis Khan ("Great Khan") managed to unite the fragmented Mongol tribes. In 1241 the Mongol armies came as far as Moravia, Central Europe.

The Mongol raids killed an estimated 40 million people. Following Genghis Khan's death the empire split into four independent units and during the 14th century it fell apart completely.

In 2006 the Mongols commemorated the 800th anniversary of the empire they are very proud of. It is also the only thing they are famous for in the world. The airport in Ulan Bator was named after Genghis Khan. The photo shows graduating college students having a picture taken in front of the statue of Genghis Khan.



The suburbs of Ulan Bator. Only from the airplane will you notice how dry the surrounding landscape is, even though the nearby mountains are covered with a scanty coniferous forest that has deteriorated so badly because of the illegal felling of trees people need for heating. In addition, Mongolians also do not bother with felling trees at the base. It is more convenient to chop or cut the tree off waist high than having to bend down.

This man is carrying away logging residue from the forest – branches he has collected. They will come handy in the yurt. In addition to wood Ulan Bator residents often use coal for heating, of which the country has large stocks. Especially in winter this produces acrid smog that suffocates people. The biggest polluters are not only industrial plants or vehicular traffic but above all tens of thousands of local fire places.





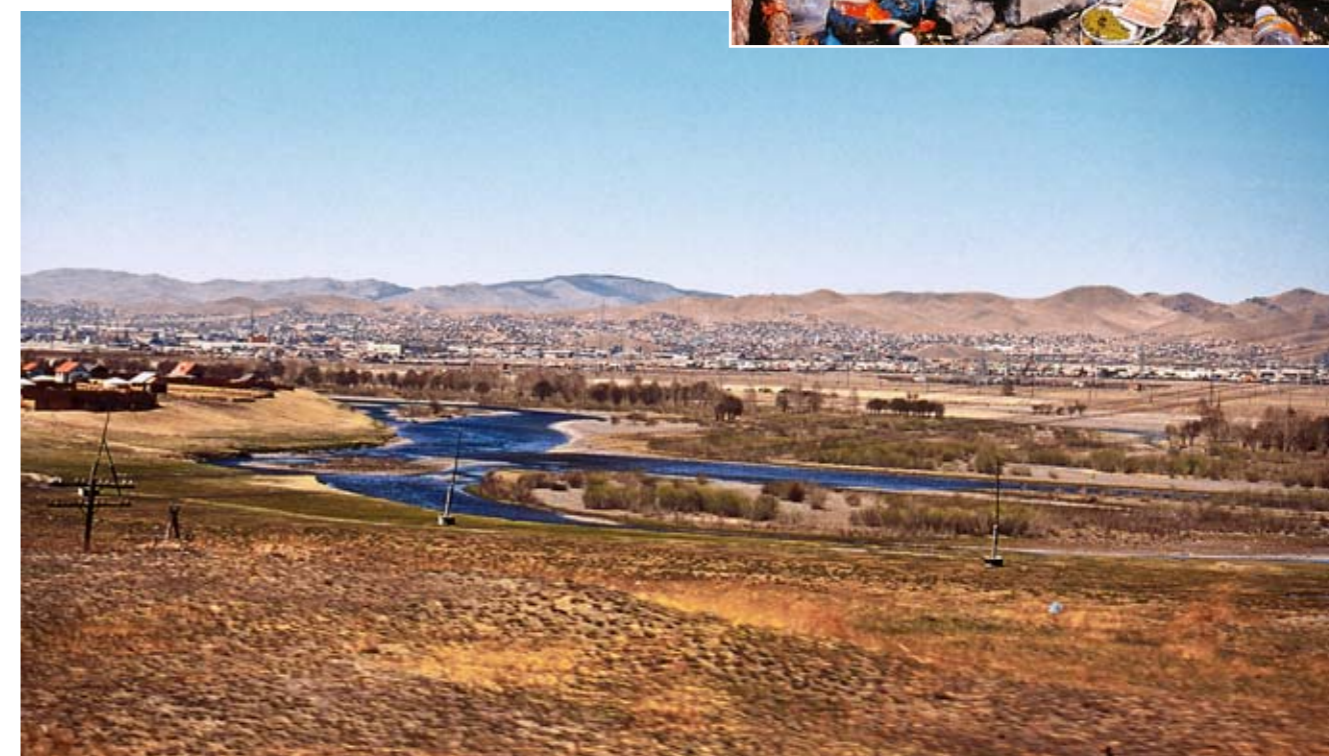
Black Market is the largest market in the city as well as in the whole country. It is nothing illegal but an official marketplace. There is a lot of stealing going on here though. Foreigners should avoid narrow and crowded streets – close contact with other people means a high risk of being robbed.

Mongolia is a poor developing country, although it is not as badly off as, for example, the sub-Saharan African countries. Thanks to its former socialist establishment it has very decent education and health care. On the other hand, the country is riddled with corruption. If the Mongols managed to sell advantageously concessions for the extraction of mineral resources (coal, copper, molybdenum, gold, tin, and others), all the inhabitants could be rich and the country could develop rapidly. Instead the only people getting exorbitantly rich are the "elite", those with the right jobs in public administration. Perhaps nowhere in the world have I seen such a concentration of modern and expensive cars as in front of the parliament and the seat of the government.



Buddhism blends here to some extent with the traditional shamanism, which is a method of communication with the spiritual world (a set of teachings and practices related to communication with the spiritual world). The hills above Ulan Bator are filled with such shamanic sites. The means to express respect are sometimes curious – a small banknote as well as a bottle of vodka may serve as the sacrifice.

One third of the country in the south is covered by the Gobi Desert. In the north and northwest the landscape is forested, with many rivers and lakes. The situation changes around the capital, although there is still some water and growth to be found.



In Mongolia the main religion is Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism in particular. Despite their communist past, 90% of the population adheres to it, at least formally. The photo shows the Gandantegchinlen Monastery with its plentiful churches that are remarkable from the architectural point of view. The monastery was established in 1835 and restored after the communist period in 1990. Now it is home to 150 monks. In the 1930s under Stalin's influence, many temples were destroyed and more than 15,000 monks were killed in Mongolia.

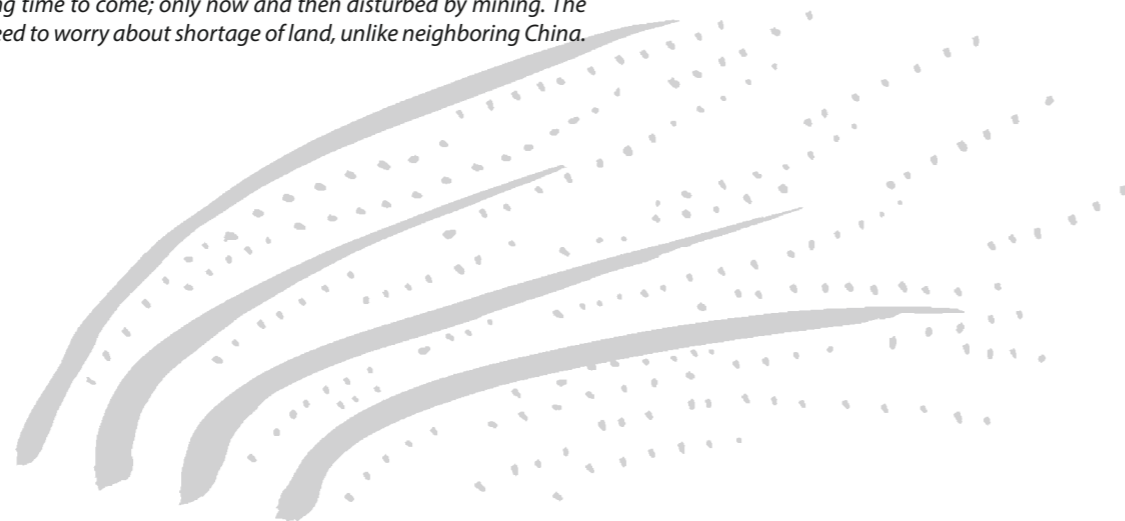




Then begins the realm of the Gobi Desert. There are occasional efforts to reclaim the edges of the desert for farming but this would require large investments and above all great effort and perseverance.



This land will continue to be a wilderness for a long time to come; only now and then disturbed by mining. The Mongols have enough space though and do not need to worry about shortage of land, unlike neighboring China.



5.9 Japan

The name Japan translates as "Land of the Rising Sun". Stretching over nearly 378 thousand square kilometers (146 sq mi), it is inhabited by 127 million people. Although its population density is high – 337 people per square kilometer – it has only a little over 12% of cultivated agricultural land and insignificant mineral resources. It is therefore remarkable what a developed country the Japanese have managed to build with such "a bad hand".

Fuji, the 3,776-meter– (12,388 ft) high volcano, is a symbol of Japan. The last time it came to life was in 1707.





A typical crop for the Japanese is rice. Its cultivation requires a sophisticated irrigation system and the cooperation of the entire community. Historically this has helped to shape the Japanese mentality: unlike the Europeans or Americans they are less individualistic and more ready to subordinate their ambitions for the benefit of the community.

Tokyo, the capital of Japan, has 13 million inhabitants, but when combined with Yokohama and other adjacent municipalities that form a dense developed megalopolis, it has up to 38 million residents.

As Tokyo lies in a seismically active area (at the junction of three tectonic plates), once in a while it experiences a major earthquake. The last one took place in 1923, killing 142,000 inhabitants. At that time there were 3 million people living in Tokyo, while today it is an order of magnitude more. On the other hand, thanks to advanced technologies the Japanese are now better prepared for another earthquake. A similar number of people (100,000) died during the World War II bombing, in March 1945, when in two days the Americans showered the city with 1,665 tons of napalm.



The Tokyo Tower was inspired by the Eiffel Tower in Paris and also measures about the same (332.5 meters [1,091 ft]). Built in 1958, since then it has been visited by 150 million people.



The city never sleeps.



The most famous parts of the city include Ginza, which is to Tokyo what Park Avenue is to New York – one huge shopping mall. Another famous venue is Shinjuku, a shopping mall but also an entertainment center popular especially with young people. If you have only limited time to spend in Tokyo, I would recommend visiting Shinjuku.





When watching these young musicians, I felt as if there was a sort of rebellion of the young going on against the established order, similar to what happened in Western countries in the second half of the 1960s. It was just my personal impression but the way the young people acted they seemed to be saying they did not care for an organized life in a suit and tie, with a career precisely outlined for many years to come.



Gardens in the Tokyo Imperial Palace. Until 1868 Tokyo was known as Edo. In 1869 the emperor moved from Kyoto to Tokyo, turning the latter into the imperial capital. In the past, the city suffered numerous fires started by carelessness with fire when trying to heat the wooden houses in winter. The worst fire took place in 1657, claiming 100,000 lives.

Japan now has a constitutional monarchy where the power of the Emperor is very limited. Since the end of World War II the emperor has ceased to be considered the "Son of Heaven"; he is a common monarch now. The current reigning Emperor, Akihito, born 1933, is the hundred and twenty-fifth of his line. At present he is the only monarch to have an imperial title (the highest ruling rank).



The Japanese usually buy food and other common household items at the market. One of the best-known is the Tsukiji Fish Market, where restaurant owners as well as ordinary people come early in the morning to buy fresh fish that will end up on a plate the very same day.



The indigenous religion that was established on the Japanese islands is Shintoism. It is a polytheistic religion, with individual gods representing the elements of the natural world. Today, however, Shintoism is beginning to lose out to Buddhism, which is practiced by about 90 million people in Japan. Very tolerant of each other, both religions blend to some extent. Often you will see a Shinto and a Buddhist shrine directly next to one another or even a single building used for the purposes of both the faiths.

The Itsukushima Shinto Shrine in Hiroshima. Considered a Japanese national treasure, its beginnings go back to the 6th century. Its present look dates to 1168. The picture in the top shows a statue of Buddha in Tokyo.





Shinkansen – the term used for a network of eight high-speed lines on the islands of Honshu and Kyushu. The trains have an operating speed of up to 300 kilometers per hour (186 mph) and run on time to the minute. They are not exactly cheap but will take you to every Japanese city within a few hours.

Hiroshima has become a sad symbol of the military use of nuclear energy. On 6 August 1945 the Americans dropped an atomic bomb on the city. The explosion instantly killed 80,000 people and destroyed 60,000 of the total 90,000 buildings. The photo shows the Atomic Bomb Dome, a peace memorial. It is a fragment of the original building designed and built by the Czech architect, Jan Letzel. It was completed and opened in 1915 as the Hiroshima Prefectural Products Exhibition Hall. The bomb detonated just 160 meters (490 feet) from the building, at an altitude of 580 (1,968 feet) meters. The Atomic Dome was the closest building to remain standing after the explosion, not having utterly collapsed. In the second picture we can compare what the building looked like before and immediately after the explosion.

Since World War II the atomic bomb has, fortunately, never been used in an armed conflict again. The second half of the 20th century saw the world focus on the peaceful use of nuclear power plants. They are not one hundred percent safe either. When I was doing my masters in Environmental Protection in the first half of the 1980s, it was believed there was only one way a nuclear reactor could explode – if an asteroid fell directly on it. Then the Chernobyl disaster took place in April 1986, caused by human error and the gross violation of safety regulations. Once stricter regulations were introduced, we were once again convinced that nuclear power was completely safe. The September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York proved this was not true. A properly cased nuclear reactor should withstand the impact of a military fighter jet but would not be able to take a hit by a much heavier airliner with a large supply of fuel, the explosion of which would produce sky-high temperatures. In consequence, the no-fly zones around nuclear power plants have been increased and anti-aircraft batteries deployed.

The latest lesson has come from Japan. Japanese nuclear power plants are technically perfect, capable of withstanding even a large earthquake. This was confirmed in the March 2011 earthquake, but no one had taken into account such a large tsunami to follow. Once the flooding reached the power plant, power was lost and the nuclear reactor could no longer be continuously cooled. Large amounts of radiation leaked into the air and the sea.

We need to realize that the use of nuclear energy is never completely trouble-free and safe, whether for military or civilian purposes. That said, it does not mean that we should reject it completely; we simply have to be on our guard when various experts try to convince us again that this time everything is truly under control.





Hiroshima was founded as early as 1589. Soon after this Hiroshima Castle was built. The picture shows how a part of it appears after reconstruction. The nuclear explosion at the end of the war destroyed many historical monuments and virtually the entire town had to be rebuilt.
Nara is a historical city near Kyoto, with 360,000 inhabitants. Back in 708 it was made the capital of the empire. This lasted until 794, when the capital was moved to Kyoto.



A Buddhist temple, Todai-ji is also the largest wooden building in the world. It houses a statue of the Great Buddha, which was completed in 751 after having consumed most of the Japanese production of bronze. It left the country near bankruptcy for several years.



Kofuku-ji is another Buddhist temple in Nara, renowned chiefly for its five-story pagoda. The temple was founded as early as 669.





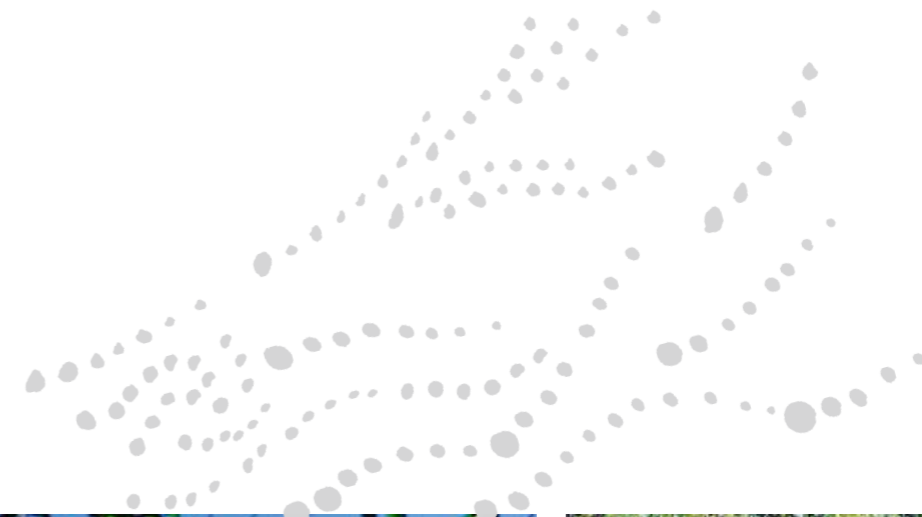
Kyoto is a modern city with nearly 1.5 million inhabitants. However, it boasts the largest number of historical landmarks. In 1997 the city hosted a major international conference resulting in the Kyoto Protocol. It committed developed countries in particular to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions generated by burning fossil fuels.



Ancient streets so pleasant to get lost in and wander around aimlessly are much more interesting than the modern part of the city.



With a bit of luck you may even catch a glimpse of a geisha or two dressed in their traditional costumes. The term geisha translates to "person of the arts". A geisha is supposed to be a beautiful and intelligent woman excelling in the ability to entertain men (by dancing, singing, or otherwise), to be their companion. Girls wishing to become geishas started their training early, often from the age of five. They had to master virtually all the traditional Japanese arts, including the tea ceremony, flower arrangement or calligraphy (the art of fancy lettering). Geisha certainly does not mean "Japanese prostitute"; even though some of them became one. A geisha is more of an "artist" and a companion, who may engage in paid sex but it is not to be taken as a matter of course. For this reason, when prostitution was prohibited in 1957, the geisha profession was not banned. Today it is almost impossible to see a geisha in the street. Even the two women in the photo may only be pretending to be geishas, to create an illusion for tourists.



The Shimogamo Shrine is one of the oldest Shinto temples in Japan and one of the seventeen major historical monuments of ancient Kyoto. The temple was built in 678, but its origins may date back even further, to the sixth century.



A begging monk. Contrary to all appearances, he is not at all similar to the "bums" we are used to seeing, young and healthy men who refuse to get a job. In the morning the monks leave the monastery to beg in the streets to learn humility. Thus they also give people the opportunity to do a good deed and so it is the donor thanking the monk for the gift and not vice versa. The donor thanks the monk for having been given a chance to become a better person.