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Eating Exactly What I Was Warned Not to Eat in India

I chose to disregard repeated warnings.

Wednesday, October 31st, 2012 12:00 PM

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By David Hammond

Before I left for India, I was warned not to eat food that contained untreated water or that was uncooked.

After I arrived in Delhi, I was warned not to eat food that contained untreated water or that was uncooked.

I chose to disregard those repeated warnings. Here's how that worked out.

My guide in Delhi was a big guy named Manjit Singh. As the last name may suggest, Manjit is a Sikh, and he took me to his temple, Gurudwara Delhi.

Before entering the temple building, we washed feet and hands. It was largely symbolic, I think, but I appreciated the sentiment, and the practice of washing hands is pretty much standard in many Hindu temples as well. The food of India has a reputation, among Westerners, for being perhaps a little unhygienic, and I can't really speak to that, but one thing is for sure: the people of India spend a lot of time every day washing up.

After we entered the Sikh temple complex, I spotted people at a tent leaving with small covered bowls of something. Manjit told me this was a very simple sweet made of wheat and rice flours, sugar and clarified butter (ghee, a standard maker of Bengali cuisine). It also contained water, and it was not cooked.

On the temple grounds, I watched as people bought the sweet for a few pennies and then proceeded to a small tent where the snack was divided in two: half "went to the house." This donated half was then given freely to anyone who wanted it. We got in line for the free stuff, though given prior warnings I was hesitant, which I suspect Manjit probably sensed. The man at the cart was



Manjit and the sweet, courtesy David Hammond



Dining hall at the Sikh Temple, courtesy David Hammond

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separating small pieces from a larger mound of the stuff and pressing into people's hands, mano a mano.

"Want some?" Manjit asked, holding out a sphere of the food, watching me.

"Sure," I said and grabbed a piece. It was okay; it tasted like Maypo. More importantly than that mildly reminiscent gustatory pleasure, however, was the trust I feel I earned. I'm not fool-hearty, but if someone offers me food that is likely safe (though perhaps not), I'll usually take the plunge. Not always, but usually. I feel that by taking that one bite, I sent the message that I was all in for whatever food came our way.

At the Sikh temple, every day, throughout the day, food is served to anyone who comes to the door. Manjit and I went into the langar, a large communal kitchen/dining room, to have lunch.

"In here, there are millionaires eating side-by-side with beggars," Manjit told me as we sat down in a huge dining room filling with a new shift of dinners. That was probably a true statement because Delhi has a lot of both.

Lunch was excellent, and not just because it was free. We ate a delicious mess of lentils, rice pudding (good, though not my kind of sweet), an excellent curry and sweet rice with saffron, chapatti on the side.

More than the simple deliciousness of our communal lunch, however, this was an excellent way to experience to some limited degree what it must be like to be a part of another culture, which I think is something we sometimes seek when eat at an ethnic restaurant. Most of us can never know what it's like to be an Indian, Japanese or German, but eating in the restaurants of those cultures, we get some inkling of what it's like to be another.

Sitting down cross-legged in a large room with a cross-section of Delhi demographics, I felt like maybe I was getting in on a vibe that would otherwise be inaccessible to gringos. I was grateful for that.

Afterwards, Manjit and I wandered around Delhi eating more stuff. I tried something called "artichokes," and although they tasted a similarly to what we know as artichokes, they seemed a different beast than what we call the same vegetable in the U.S.

And just so you know I did exercise some precautions when eating, I did not buy water from the guy selling a sip for a few rupees and and despite the fact that it was a hot on the subcontinent, I did not try anything from the refrigerated trolleys, which were selling a kind of homemade limeade. See, I do listen to advice. Sometimes.

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