First Day in India; First Mistakes

We were warned, but I guess you don't learn until you experience it yourself.

My husband and I ventured into the market square, which we were assured by Americans and British we had already met, was safe but to expect a culture shock. Entering the area wasn't the mistake.

Let me step back and give you an idea of the intensity of the setting. It's a swarm of humanity. Bodies buying, selling, haggling, walking, eating but mostly hawking. All within inches of us. People are sitting on the stone streets eating spicy rice with their hands. Others are hacking off coconut tops, pushing against you to buy one. Young men everywhere selling feather dusters, rags, carrying bundles of something on their backs. Maybe it's collected scrap paper.

Wares, everywhere, wares.

It's like *Mardi Gras* in New Orleans. No, it's like a medieval market. No, it's like … I can't describe it!

And they hawk. I mean the kind of selling that I've never witnessed. I've seen the best of the best in New York City. I come from a family that considers sales an art form. But I have never witnessed the likes of the hard sell I beheld in Kolkata at the New Market.

Confusing, bewildering and oh, so sophisticated.

It was as though their mere existence depended on a sale.

Wait a minute … it does!

And the mistake is what I wore. I was a dead ringer for a Westerner. I donned a raincoat, black skirt and loose, white jersey with a black patent leather quilted bag. Modest, but clearly a foreigner.

Not smart.

All the women were in *sarees* or *salwar kameez* in tropical prints and gay colors. (A *kameez,* as it's called, is that pervasive outfit that Indian women often wear, made of baggy cotton pajama-styled pants with a tunic top, when they're not in the more traditional *saree.*)

In my New York outfit, I certainly made an impression. I was a mark for the vulnerable, impressionable, wide-eyed Westerner.

Inadvertently and intentionally, we were "guided" by a friendly vendor into an open market structure with cobblestones that were likely laid 300-400 years ago.

When I say guided, it became apparent that the stall owners waited at the entrance of the market to find vulnerable, unsuspecting souls like us and kindly but firmly move them along to their stall where they sold items of their specialty.

We had entered a time warp. The smells, the wares, the commotion, the way they pressed you. Everyone was friendly, smiling and consistently courteous, but the sales pitches were nothing short of remarkable.

I could barely resist.

I wasn't even interested in a cashmere shawl, and had I not been with my husband, I might have bought 7 of them! He adroitly led me out as fast as he could when he perceived my confusion. I really don't think it was jet lag … it was a 400-plus-year-old marketing technique for which I was totally unprepared.

I ended up unscathed by buying three $3 silk, thread-covered bracelets.

Nothing could have primed me for this experience. Next time we venture in, I'll be wearing indigenous clothes and have a paid guide with us.

I had planned on living in a *salwar kameez* during our stay in this exotic land but simply hadn't gotten that far.

It's obvious now that I should have made it a priority.

Tomorrow, I'm going shopping in a nearby store for one. I plan to wear it at the homeopathy center and on the streets without exception.