

What a charming fellow.



500 Rupees ... Well, That's Just Charming

YOU MIGHT THINK I'VE CUT OFF MY HEAD AND REPLACED IT WITH a pumpkin — few would disagree — but I've long had this morbid fascination with snakes. The reptilian variety that is, not the one-eyed trouser snake that the late, great Sigmund Freud devised all those complicated theories about. This fascination included wanting a photograph of a snake charmer in full flight — and what better place to get one than India!

As always happens when you're trying your damndest to find something, you never do. I had more chance of bumping into a Golden Arches "restaurant" in the land of the sacred cow of the Hindu than a snake charmer as I aimlessly wandered the streets of New Delhi. Until, stumbling around yet another corner of the amazing Connaught Place maze, I saw him — a small, bearded fella with an orange turban, sitting cross-legged and blowing a flute while eyeball-to-eyeball with a king cobra.

Yes, a king cobra, as long as the proverbial fireman's hose. The snake charmer could easily have passed for a younger Kevin "Bloody" Wilson, except for his turban and the fact there wasn't a beer or guitar within cooee. Two-dozen expressionless Indians stood watching the battle of wills between this crazy little man and the cobra.

“Do you mind if I take a photograph of you and the snake?” I asked the snake charmer, a reasonable question, I thought.

He didn’t bat an eyelid, so focused was he on the seemingly hypnotised cobra. A middle-aged bystander, forever the opportunist, said: “Here, you good boy – give me your camera. I would very much like to take your picture with the snake charmer.”

With a dodgy dial like mine, I hadn’t planned on being in the action – but this was too good an opportunity to let slip. Who knows? A photo of this ilk could help launch a brand new career modelling the blatantly obscure and bloody ridiculous.

By now the snake charmer had seen me and, with the prospect of a few rupees being slung *his* way, beckoned me to join him and his slippery sideshow in the corner. I handed my camera to the friendly bloke in the crowd – not a smart move while travelling most would say – and gingerly stepped over two other baskets near the snake charmer, all the while acutely aware of the cobra’s movements. The snake man introduced himself as Raju.

I mumbled something to the effect: “Is the snake the biting kind and, if so, is there a doctor in the house?”

“Fear not!” Raju roared, and grabbed the cobra from his basket as casually as you would a six-pack of coldies from the fridge. But not in a million years would I’ve predicted his next move. He wrapped the snake behind my neck, resting its head on my shoulder. Fortunately, I was wearing dark trousers such was my anxious state of mind and, more particularly, body.

I thought I heard the photographer yell: “Smile for the camera, you good boy!” Easy for you to say, sunshine ... geez, these Indians have a wicked sense of humour. I did very well given I was paranoid even the slightest facial movement would send the cobra straight for the jugular. The camera flashed a few times and my life flashed before me, but I was one happy little vegemite when Raju put the snake back into its basket. What a bloody relief! I best give this character some cash for his trouble, as you do in India.

"Thanks, Raju, that was fun. I must recommend you ... to my enemies. Only joking. How much do you want for this privilege?" I asked.

"As you like," replied Raju, with his head swaying from side-to-side in that uniquely Indian way.

I'd copped the "as you like" line plenty of times in India. But it always seemed that what I liked to pay was substantially *less* than what they, the merchants, liked to receive. Still, I'd done OK in the bargaining stakes thus far and saw no reason why this situation should be any different. I placed a 50-rupee note barely a dollar and bugger all in Oz, but the daily wage for many Indians in Raju's eagerly outstretched hand.

He looked at it and laughed mockingly: "Oh no, no, no, no you must be joking, kind sir." I could tell he was as happy with my offer as an Arab with a three-legged camel.

"Well, if this isn't enough, what is?" I asked nervously.

"Oh, that is the question the world is waiting to be answered," he replied, with more than a hint of sarcasm. "I very much think 500 rupees is enough, my good friend. Being a snake charmer in Delhi is a very, very expensive business: snake charmer's licence, health insurance, anti-venom prescriptions, footpath rental, police protection payments. It is never ending."

Appalled at his blatant greed, I started to walk away. I didn't get too far - nowhere at all, in fact. In a flash, Raju lifted the lids off the other baskets, and two snakes reared their ugly heads. Their beady eyes peered right at me, daring me to move. One false move and ...

"Ah, my friend, you still think that 50 rupees is a fair price to pay for a photo with one of my prize snakes?" the shifty Raju sneered.

"W-w-w-well, Raju, I'm rapidly coming around to your p-p-p-point of view - very rapidly, if you must know. I-I-I-I'm sure it's a very expensive caper being a s-s-s-snake charmer in D-D-D-Delhi," I replied, feebly handing him a 500-rupee note.

I slowly edged my way out, ever mindful of Raju's cobra collective. My photographer "friend" returned my camera and I gave him the obligatory 50 rupees for services rendered.

"Do tell your friends about the great Raju, you good boy," he said, smiling. "He is most definitely a very good snake charmer quite possibly the best in all of India."

Quite possibly the "best what?" in all of India. The best ripoff merchant most likely; the best charlatan most definitely; but a fringin' ordinary snake charmer all the same. But I couldn't really complain because I'd obtained that elusive snake charmer photo, in far different circumstances than I'd ever imagined. And I've certainly got my 500 rupees' worth — many times over — since that day in Delhi when I "tangled" with Raju the snake charmer and his scaly mates.

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