

Let's Hug Day: Celebrating the Power of Connection

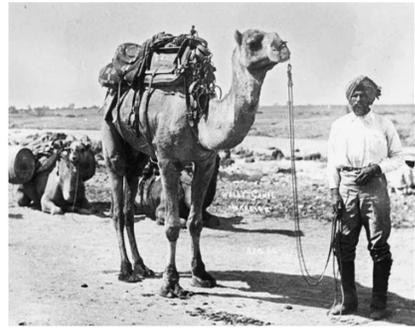
Let's Hug Day celebrates the simple yet powerful act of a hug, a universal gesture of warmth, comfort, and connection. Observed annually, the day reminds us how a heartfelt embrace can lift spirits, ease stress, and strengthen relationships. Studies show that hugging releases oxytocin, often called the 'love hormone,' which helps lower blood pressure and promotes emotional well-being. In a fast-paced world dominated by screens and distance, Let's Hug Day encourages people to pause, reach out, and share genuine human connection. Whether it's family, friends, or someone in need, a hug speaks the language of care without words.



#HISTORY

The Afghans and Their Camels in Australia

The story of the Afghans and their camels is one of resilience, cultural exchange, and contribution to Australia's growth



In the mid-19th century, Australia's vast and arid interior posed significant challenges for exploration and settlement. Early European settlers struggled with the harsh desert environment, but the introduction of Afghan cameleers and their camels revolutionized the exploration and development of the Australian outback.

The Arrival of Afghans and Camels
In the 1860s, the British brought Afghan camels to Australia to aid in transport across the country's vast, dry interior. Camels, unlike horses, were well-suited to the Australian outback, able to carry heavy loads, travel long distances, and survive on minimal water. The Afghan cameleers, mostly from regions like Afghanistan, northern India, and Pakistan, were skilled in handling these animals and navigating harsh desert landscapes.

Contributions to Exploration and Transport
1. **Exploration and Mapping**
The Afghans played a crucial role in mapping Australia's interior. Their expertise in desert travel helped explorers like John McDouall Stuart and Edward Hiley survey remote regions of the outback. This was vital for opening up the central desert areas to future settlement and development.
2. **Establishing Transport Routes**
Camels were used to haul goods across long distances, vital for connecting remote settlements and cities. One of their most important contributions was to the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line, which connected Australia to the rest of the world. Camels could transport supplies over the desert in ways that horses and oxen couldn't.
3. **Camel Industry**
Camel industry grew as the demand for long-distance transport continued. By the

early 20th century, Australia had the largest herd of wild camels in the world. Many of the camels brought by the Afghans were released into the wild once their primary role in transport diminished.

Cultural Legacy of the Afghan Cameleers
The Afghan cameleers didn't just contribute to Australia's exploration; they also formed small communities, particularly in places like Murrumbidgee and Port Augusta in South Australia. They built mosques, established shops, and lived according to their traditions, leaving a lasting cultural imprint. They were often marginalized and faced discrimination, although their contributions were integral to the development of Australia's interior.
Decline of the Camel Era
With the advent of motorized vehicles in the early 20th century, the use of camels for transport began to decline. As the camel era waned, many Afghans returned to their homeland, though some remained in Australia and integrated into the broader society. However, despite their vital role, Afghan cameleers were often overlooked in Australian history.

The Legacy of the Ghan
Today, the Afghan cameleers' contributions are celebrated, particularly through the Ghan Railway, named in honour of the cameleers. The legacy of the camels also lives on in the wild herds that roam the outback. Museums and historical societies across Australia recognize the crucial role of the Afghans in opening up the interior and shaping the nation's development.
The story of the Afghans and their camels is one of resilience, cultural exchange, and contribution to Australia's growth. The cameleers not only helped map the outback but also created a transport system that opened up vast regions of Australia. Their legacy remains a vital part of the nation's history and continues to inspire interest in the role of immigrants in shaping Australia.



Puget Sound water body with Mt Rainier in the back.

● Rakshat Hooja

So, I had met this good looking MGDian last November. She would often hang out with me. Or actually, I would with her but this is my story. It was basically volunteering for pro bono work, still fun. I never asked her age as I had a feeling the age gap was going to turn out to be huge and I would have felt old! So, why put myself through that agony?
Then one day my school classmate, Rishi, who is a Professor of Physics at an IIT, came to the cafe where we were having coffee. Obviously, he joined us, was very excited that the girl was an MGDian and immediately mentioned that she must know his sister. Rishi also added that his sister passed out in 96.

The girl stopped eating. She said 96 twice. Rishi was excited as he thought she was thinking of people in the batch. Then, she said I was not even born in 96. How can you think I am that old? And she has not spoken to Rishi since then.
I just laughed uncontrollably and told Rishi that he is old. And told the girl that I am 2008 batch. And she has invited me to lunch to her farm once I recover from COVID!

COVID
Did I say recover from Covid? I am in hospital and recovering. I had tested positive a few days ago and was asymptomatic. But symptoms appeared and here I am. But getting better, so that is another positive. And lots and lots of positive vibes from well wishers. That has really kept me going.



Students' overnight field trip, Shekhawati, 2005.



Anne with her partner.

RECONNECT
And something very interesting happened. My students from the days when I directed the University of Minnesota, India Program found out that I was unwell. They decided to send me letters from the US to cheer me up. It just felt so good to reconnect.
The letters were different. Like ones we used to write in India nearly two decades ago. Not short or pointed with a get well soon end; but descriptions of their lives, memories of India, new happenings etc. Reminded me of postal letters we wrote to our cousins during school and college days.

Meridith
She was a student of the first batch I taught. One of my favourites. A theatre graduate, she now lives in New York State.
"We (my partner and I) are ok. We've been pandemic-lucky: able to work from home mostly. We had scheduled our wedding in January



Raghu and Amanda at Lake Superior.

2019 for October 2021, and suddenly, need to actually plan it so working on that a lot. I see my sister tomorrow! I know you remember her fondly! I'm going to stay with them till the 7th just to help out and give her and her husband some kid relief.
Fauci- the new pup- is driving us crazy but she's very cute. She's way cuddlier than Esquire was at this age. But she's also way less motivated by food which makes training hard. She's still a nightmare on a leash!
So, some memories of 2005 India now. We all really missed cheese. It was the one food we couldn't really find, and for some reason, we were so homesick for it. Seema had her partner ship us velveta and we found macaroni in a store and paid way too much for it and we had a secret macaroni and cheese party. And it was HEAVENLY.
This cheese situation was the same reason we ended up at Pizza Hut sometimes. It was the designated expat American hangout in town because it was the only place that tasted just like home. Kirstin would sneak in booze and spike our sodas and we'd eat cheesy breadsticks!" A very different India in 2005 indeed!

Amy Kae
Spent a full year in India. And then more time in Bangalore. Remember long discussions about research and life in India with her. Lives in Seattle now. "I'll try to keep it as light as possible since I can imagine how tired you must be of everything else. Things are starting to stabilize here - regarding both COVID and the political climate.
Sameer (her husband) and I recently spent a month in Los Angeles. We traveled by car, as safe-

Letters make me feel better...

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Ruby Canyon, Colorado

Venice beach's sunset



Mountain town lake, North Idaho.

#GETTING BETTER



Amy with her husband.



Foraged mushrooms.



Emma with her daughter.



Fauci and Esquire in Mere's New York Home.

as we could. It was wonderful to get a change in scenery, and particularly, weather. All the while understanding how lucky we are, and have been.
We stayed less than a block from the beach in Venice. Have you visited Venice? Knowing you, you probably have! I'm always impressed by how many places you visit when you come to the U.S. Love it. We really enjoyed Venice and the sunny, mild weather is a bonus. We appreciate that it's a historical surfing spot and attracts crowds from all over the world, especially during spring break and summer.
Being close to the beach was amazing. I've never had such easy access to the sand and water and it was a real treat! It was so peaceful and energizing at the same time.
When we returned from L.A., spring had sprung in the Puget Sound area, so it was nice to come home to flowers blooming, birds

singing, and green leaves on trees. It was the perfect time to leave and then come back, a cool transformation to experience. We've been mostly keeping busy with work. I've been in my current role for just over two years, managing web content and web analytics for a team at Microsoft. I'm lucky to say that I love both my job and my team, and hope to continue doing this sort of work for some time to come." Parts of the US do seem to be moving back towards normal. I do hope it stays that way.
Emma
She did her medical internship in the back and beyond of Rajasthan. An amazing woman whose travel blog became the inspiration for my own travel and writing. "Happy to share some more positive news. I have a daughter who is about to turn 2 in a few months - she is my greatest joy in life. I've been also lucky to be able to work from home

during the pandemic so far. Also, I live in Colorado now and the mountains and hiking has been a new adventure.
I remember so many things about the time in India - it was a period of real personal growth for me. One memory I've thought about lately is the overnight bus ride I took to get to the location of my internship. It was a long night but sitting in the bus as the sun came up was such a beautiful sight. The terrain was flat, vast and brown with a single huge tree, and right by the tree, the sun was coming up practically bright red and so huge. Everyone on the bus got a really special view and it was a great welcome to a new place that I'd be exploring the next few weeks. I've never seen the sun rise so big before.
I also laugh thinking about getting to know Sumita Bappa, my host mom. She wasn't the warmest host at first and I would show up to her kitchen in the morning hoping to learn. She really made me earn her respect and I would show up every day and she would say you can watch - finally, after what felt like weeks, she let me peel a potato with her. From then on, I had passed the test I think to make it in her kitchen and I learned her recipe for daal and a cabbage carrot dish and how to make roti. I still remember and cook those dishes today! So many great memories but those two popped into mind just now." Rites of passage in an Indian kitchen! Always an interesting story!
Anne
One of the nicest people you will ever meet. Always helping everyone. I still remember how worried she was when I was dropping her to the bus to her internship site and

how confident she became subsequently. "I'm doing good. I haven't been affected by corona and most of the people are getting vaccinated here, so, life is feeling somewhat more 'normal' as they say. I am working as a Medical Massage Therapist in Standpoint, a small mountain lake town in Northern Idaho! I love it. It's quiet and serene. I think about India often. I look forward to visiting there again someday soon."
Ammanda
One of my best friends from the Minnesota days. Attended her marriage in Nepal a couple of years ago!
"Oh my India memory. I was

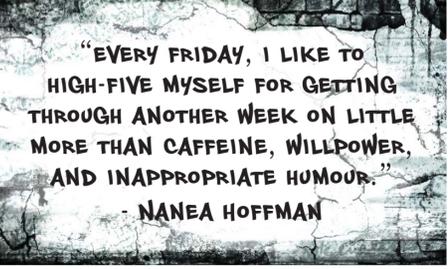
with several other Minnesota students, all girls, and we were on a train somewhere in Punjab. I think we were going to Dharamshala via Amritsar? We had a bottle of beer, and we were trying to keep it concealed from any judgy eyes of people around us, but also trying to open it without a bottle opener. We were sitting in one section of benches, and there were two very large, silent, uncle-aged men, sitting on the little bench across the aisle from us. After struggling unsuccessfully for about 5 minutes to either keep our activity a secret or to open the bottle, one of the men, a Sikh, made a noise and motioned for us to give him the bottle. He had a really stern look on his

face, and we were really afraid he was angry and going to take it from us, that he was upset we were trying to drink alcohol. We all froze, then slowly handed it to him. Now what? All of our jaws dropped as he silently opened the beer WITH HIS STEEL BANGLE and handed it back to us. He had been scoffing because he just couldn't watch us struggling like amateurs anymore. It was so cool. We all laughed and had a great rest of our journey.
In Minnesota, now that we are in month 14 of quarantine, we have been doing what we can to stay busy. We planted a lot of fruit trees and bushes last summer- peaches, plums, apples, apricots, strawberries, blueberries, gooseberries (which is very similar to amla) and raspberries. We should get berries this year and hopefully peaches next year. Apples, plums and blueberries will take longer... I've just started some tomato seedlings that I will plant at the end of May.
I've also started taking long hikes in the wildlife refuge near my house and birdwatching. Apparently, there are 200-odd birds that fly through here each year, and I had no idea. I've been trying to find some of them. We've also tried our hands at foraging for mushrooms." Bird watching is one of my favourite activities too!
As I read through these letters and many more, I felt so much better. When we are struggling, personally and as a nation, it means a lot to know there are people and friends out there who care, are doing well and are willing to share. The road to recovery is long. But when you have friends, it can be easier. I am home now and getting better.
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Group photo in Indian clothes - Amy in green saree on my left.

THE WALL



BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman