



# TRAVEL, ELEPHANTS, FRIENDS & FAMILY

BY MICHAEL E. SNYDER, MD | CINCINNATI EYE INSTITUTE

As a young resident, the month I spent at Aravind Eye Hospital in Madurai, India, during my last year of training was one of the most special travel experiences of my life. I was the happy and lucky beneficiary of exemplary warmth, kindness, and teaching from the entire Aravind team and was welcomed immediately into the Aravind family. Of course, when traveling in a less familiar culture, each of us takes a little time to adapt our contextual awareness to the environment. One early-morning encounter with a *wild* elephant caught me off guard.

Still a bit jet-lagged, I was walking to the hospital to begin my day, and I couldn't help but notice an elephant that seemed to be following my path. I changed my direction—so did he. I picked up my pace—so did he. Envisioning a stampede, I began to run—and so did he! Terrified, I imagined my parents' grief learning of their son's demise as a flattened road stain under the foot of the multi-ton beast. Spying a large pallet of bricks at a nearby construction site, I darted behind them and crouched, hoping that the elephant would be dissuaded from crushing me. Moments later, I

felt the gentle touch of the elephant's snout tapping my head to bless me. I looked up to the smiling face of the elephant's mahout riding on his thick neck, who, prior to that instant, I had neither seen nor imagined. I then felt even more welcomed, not only by Madurai's great people, but by their pachyderms, too.

Though my hair has greyed, my love for travel remains strong. I continue to venture "outside the office," sharing my love of travel with my family, seeking new adventures, climbing (and riding) to new and different heights. ■