

48 hours in Mumbai

or how shadowing my Executive Mentor meant using my passport

by Rebecca Spexarth, MKTG '09



When I was paired with J.P. Bilbrey, CEO of The Hershey Company, as part of the K-State Business Executive Mentor Program, I was excited. Never did I think that the match would take me across the world to Mumbai, India, to shadow my mentor during a business trip.

The trip would start in Hershey, Pa., where I would meet the team and learn about the various opportunities in a Fortune 500 consumer goods company. Then, in true CEO fashion, we planned to be in India for roughly 24 hours; enough time for J.P. to complete the final negotiations of a joint venture acquisition. After the 14-hour flight from Newark to Mumbai, we would end up being in the air longer than we were on the ground in India. I had never crossed an ocean, and I was ready to be shocked.

I expected Mumbai's humidity to be similar to August in Kansas, with unique smells and a different level of city development and cleanliness. The difference was overwhelming. Stepping off the plane felt like stepping straight into a sauna, including a distinct damp earth smell.

My first dark glance of Mumbai was astonishing. The airport was full of life despite being the middle of the night. There was no demarcation between different socioeconomic statuses; slums were intermingled with five-star hotels and million-dollar lofts. There seemed to be no traffic rules, but there were also no car accidents, as the Indian drivers had a remarkably keen awareness and intuition that somehow maintained a synchronized flow of vehicles, scooters, rickshaws, pedestrians and animals.

After a few hours of sleep, J.P. went to finalize Hershey's joint venture acquisition, while I met up with Hershey's local sales representatives. We spent

the day touring the various distribution and retail outlets in Mumbai, from modern Walmart stores and shopping malls to the slums of Dharavi. This was an incredible way to quickly learn about the Indian culture. From fresh vegetables and a variety of bulk rice, to one-time use toiletries and exquisite handmade sweets like Kaju Katli (cashew fudge), it was enlightening to see the day-to-day activities of Indians in the market.

Halfway through my day in Mumbai, my mentor surprised me. He had changed my flight so that my stay in India would be extended for an additional day, allowing me to sit in on Hershey's strategic planning meeting with the local team, purchase a traditional Indian dress, tour a local cooking oil factory, and visit the Gateway to India and the Taj Mahal Hotel.

We were treated to multiple authentic Indian meals with the Hershey team, including one tandoori restaurant, where we ate assorted curries, breads, kebabs, lamb meat and soft cheeses, all with our hands. I heard the 4 a.m. Islamic call to prayer. It was the month of Ramadan, and my tour guides were eating a large meal before fasting from dawn to sunset.

Roughly 48 hours after arriving in Mumbai, I was back at the airport, hustling back through security and boarding the plane for my return flight. Back in the lush rolling hills of Hershey, I spent the rest of the week participating in J.P.'s executive meetings and observed presentations by consultants and investment bankers. I learned more about Hershey's domestic business and growth platforms. From compensation packages and sales discussions with Hershey VPs, to tours of a very technologically advanced (and delightful smelling) confectionery

factory, my days were jam-packed with a variety of stimulating experiences.

As part of my trip, I visited the Milton Hershey School. Hershey's commitment to corporate social responsibility is notable, in large part due to this cost-free, private boarding school for children from families of low incomes, low resources, and social need. It was enlightening to learn that a significant portion of Hershey's proceeds go directly to the school to give young students an opportunity to thrive. Makes me feel much less guilty about splurging on Reese's and Kisses. By the end of my week with J.P. and The Hershey Company, I was exhausted and happily overstuffed with chocolate.

My Executive Mentor experience has been rewarding, being exposed to so many extraordinary people and places. In our initial conversations, J.P. told me his goal was to give me an opportunity to "see the possibilities." In one intensive week, I not only saw the possibilities, but made personal and professional relationships that will become exceedingly meaningful as I pursue my career.

I will never forget watching more than 1,200 Hershey's Kisses being formed at a time, the unforgettable warmth of the people in Mumbai, and my candid and honest conversations with J.P. and his staff. I will be forever grateful to Kansas State University, the College of Business, J.P. Bilbrey, and everyone at Hershey who made this once-in-a-lifetime experience possible.

Rebecca Spexarth is an MBA student. She was matched with J.P. Bilbrey, CEO of The Hershey Company, as part of the Executive Mentor program. To learn more and to become an Executive Mentor, please visit cba.k-state.edu/ExecutiveMentor.