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Chicago-area tourists in Mumbai tell of ordeal

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One couple climbed down a fire escape to safety

November 29, 2008 | By Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah and Lisa Black, Tribune reporters and Tribune reporter Tara Malone contributed to this report.

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A Chicago couple were rescued by Indian commandos after spending more than 40 hours holed up in a hotel room. A Deerfield couple in the same tour group grew tired of waiting and escaped on their own, climbing down a fire escape. A family from Lake Forest fled to a darkened banquet hall, hiding for two hours before escaping through a side door.

"It was scary, very scary," Dr. Deepak Dalia said Friday by cell phone from the Indian city of Mumbai. "Those two hours in the banquet hall felt like two days."

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The ordeals of three Chicago-area families emerged Friday before Indian officials said the terrorist siege had been quashed.

Dalia, 58, a radiologist from Lake Forest, was visiting his native country, shopping for a daughter's wedding and introducing his non-Indian son-in-law to the city of his birth. Accompanying him were his wife, Himani, 58, a pathologist at Vista Medical Center East in Waukegan; their daughter, Anokhi Bock, 31, a pediatric dentist; her husband, Derek, 32, an orthodontist; and the Bocks' 15-month-old daughter, Bela.

They were dining in an Italian restaurant when they heard gunshots in the lobby of the nearby Oberoi Hotel, Dalia said. Restaurant staff quickly locked the doors, ushering guests through the kitchen and into a banquet hall where they tried to keep people quiet and calm. The hall eventually became a sanctuary for 200 people from throughout the Oberoi.

Dalia said that at first, he thought the shooting was a clash of rival gangs, but in the banquet hall he realized that a large-scale terrorist attack was under way when he heard explosives outside the hotel and overheard a guest tell another that a friend had been shot.

When Derek Bock took his wife into a bathroom outside the banquet hall, they heard grenades go off and ran back inside. After two hours, police gave the OK for everyone in the hall to escape through a side door.

Until Wednesday, Bock's first trip to India, which included stops in New Delhi, Agra and

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Jaipur, had been beautiful. Bock said that although he's upset security guards were not manning the metal detectors in the Oberoi's lobby and that the banquet hall was guarded by unarmed hotel staff the entire time, he's grateful the family got out safely.

"It was terrifying," Bock said. "You feel so helpless. There's nothing you can do."

The family is staying with relatives and plans to leave Mumbai on Sunday.

A 40-hour ordeal

At another luxury hotel, the iconic Taj Mahal Palace & Tower, the ordeal of Carol and Benjamin Mackoff of Chicago lasted far longer -- more than 40 hours.

They were on the final leg of a three-week trip with Tauck Tours, whose clientele is primarily seniors. She is an investment banking executive who runs Rice Financial's Chicago office. Her husband is a former chief presiding judge of the Cook County Circuit Court Domestic Relations Division who is a divorce mediator with Schiller, DuCanto & Fleck.

Their son, River North chiropractor Jonathan Mackoff, said they were accompanied by his aunt, Renee Pasikov of Highland Park, and his mother's best friend, Sandra Kuzlik of Chicago.

Upon hearing about the attacks, Jonathan Mackoff, 37, called the hotel at 12:30 p.m. Wednesday and was switched to his parents' room. His mother told him their cable television was cut, and hotel staff had told guests to stay in their rooms, not answer the door for anyone except security and keep quiet.

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He said he forwarded his mother's cell phone and hotel room numbers to officials at the U.S. Consulate.

Jonathan Mackoff said that during the siege his parents drank bottled water and ate food from the mini-bar, extra Kashi bars and peanut butter. He tried to keep his text messages light, joking about keeping his father away from the Toblerone in the mini-bar and writing, "Make sure you get this night written off on your bill."

Early Friday, his mother sent a text message saying the U.S. Consulate had told them an assault would begin in five minutes. His mother later told him by text that she could hear people running, explosions and gunfire. At 4 a.m. Chicago time, Mackoff got a text message from his mother saying they were safe in the lobby.

"They informed us the final assault was beginning, and we got a call from the colonel of the [Indian] army, and he said, 'We will give you a password and if we come to the door and give it to you, come quietly with us,'" Carol Mackoff said in a telephone interview with CNN, adding that gunmen had run her doorbell twice during the ordeal.

Tauck Tours said a 71-year-old Australian who was part of the group had died. Mackoff, his voice cracking, said his mother had told him the man was shot in the crossfire.

"That hit home," he said. "That could've been anyone in the group."

They're expected to return to Chicago on Saturday.

On their own

Joe and Marilyn Ernsteen of Deerfield also were staying in the Taj as part of Tauck Tours.

They told friends by e-mail that they heard bomb blasts and gunfire rattling around them.

They eventually decided to go against hotel instructions and leave their room, heading into the hallway through "heavy smoke" and "running water," Joe Ernsteen, 67, wrote in an e-mail.

"About 9 a.m. in the morning, he decided that's it, and they made their way out," said their daughter-in-law, Jennifer Ernsteen of Buffalo Grove. "We're lucky they didn't run into anybody and that they made it out safely."

Ernsteen and his wife, 66, went to the roof, then climbed down the fire escape to the ground, according to Ernsteen's e-mail.

"The army and police were amazed," Ernsteen wrote.

Ernsteen, who retired recently from a career in banking, is a past president of Glenview's B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim congregation, which planned to offer a prayer of gratitude during Friday night services.

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Family trip interrupted

See a Lake Forest family in Mumbai just before the attack at chicagotribune.com/dalia

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