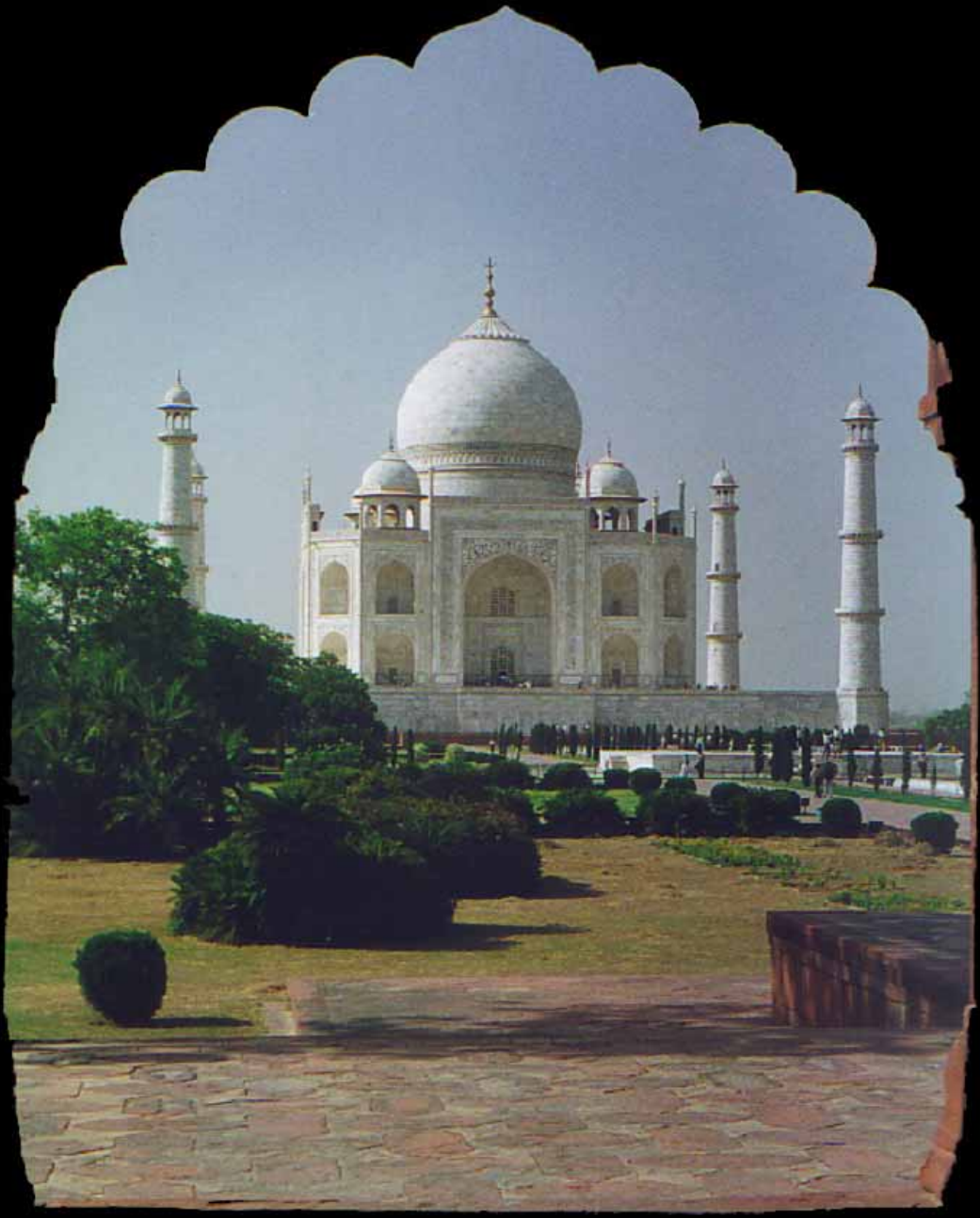
Many Ways to Change Your Mind

Travels in India

Mark Moxon



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Many Ways to Change Your Mind: Travels in India
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Cover Photograph: The Taj Mahal viewed from a nearby building, Agra, Uttar Pradesh

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Foreword

This book is a collection of writing from the road, covering a five-month trip I made to India in 1998. This was part of a much larger, three-year journey that took me through Australia, New Zealand, French Polynesia, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, India and Nepal, from 1995 to 1998.

The travelogue for all these countries and more can be found at my personal website at **www.moxon.net**, where you can also find travel tips, recommended journeys and further free books for you to download. If you enjoy reading this book, then I'd be delighted if you would sign my website's Guestbook.

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Finally, please be aware that this book is highly satirical, which means there's a slight chance that it might cause offence those who think my sense of

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humour is amusing as a puddle of mud. On top of this, some parts will be out of date – which is why each article is dated – and others will betray the naivety of a traveller who discovered his way in the world by throwing himself into it headfirst. It is, however, an honest account of how I felt as I travelled the world for three years, and as such, I hope you enjoy it.

Mark Moxon, September 2004

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Map


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West Bengal and Orissa

Thoughts Before Arriving

Written: 18 January 1998

I've been excited about India for some time now. How can one fail to be stunned by the statistics about a country that contains one-sixth of the world's population? Check out these selected facts I gleaned from a bunch of articles in *Time* magazine:

- Five people die in traffic accidents in Delhi every day.

- Fully three-quarters of the structures in Delhi violate building standards in some way.

- Population growth is 2 per cent per year, less than half the rate it was before Nehru's family planning programme in 1951 (which was the first one among developing nations). That's still 18 million new mouths to feed every year, or more than half the population of Canada appearing every year in a country less than one-third of the size.

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- Delhi is the world's fourth most-polluted metropolis. One report estimates that the average Delhi-*wallah* inhales the toxic equivalent of the smoke from 20 cigarettes every day.

- The population of India is 950 million[1], one-sixth of the world's population. Of these, 350 million are below the poverty line (as many as those living in India at Independence), and 250 million are middle class.

- Of these 950 million most are Hindus; there are over 100 million Muslims (only Indonesia and Pakistan have more), 20 million Christians, 18 million Sikhs, 7.5 million Buddhists, 4 million Jains, and loads of other minority faiths. It's amazing that the country hasn't succumbed to mass violence or dictatorship: the world's largest democracy is fairly docile, outside of hotspots like Kashmir and the activities of Tamil sympathisers in the southeast.

- More than a million people in Delhi live rough in homemade squats called *jhuggi bastis*; some even illegally tap into the electricity supply. They endure dysentery, cholera and dengue fever: one

[1] It's now broken through the one billion limit…

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in ten babies born to them dies in its infancy. They struggle to eke a living as construction workers, rickshaw peddlers, street hawkers or servants.

- Delhi is full of historical buildings: there have been at least eight cities there in the last 3000 years, and some scholars say there have been up to 15. Traffic on one of New Delhi's main thoroughfares has to swerve around the masonry slab that marks a Muslim saint's grave; the Delhi Golf Club fairways have royal tombs as unique hazards.

Is it any wonder I've been excited about visiting India for some time now? Compared to the indifference I experienced when I read about Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, India is a major draw card. As I touched down in Calcutta on the morning of January 18th I couldn't wait. I wasn't to be disappointed.

Calcutta

Written: 21 January 1998

Calcutta has an image problem. Ask most people what springs to mind when you mention the capital of West Bengal, and the images are of black holes, excessive

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pollution, slums, Mother Theresa and human tragedy. The guidebooks recommend that if this is your first visit to India, you shouldn't make Calcutta your point of arrival. They have a point, but in my case it was exactly what I needed to shake the cobwebs of complacency away: it has got to be the best introduction to a country I've ever experienced. Talk about getting a buzz from travelling…

Calcutta is a calamity of humanity. From the minute you step off the plane, it's in your face, shocking and surprising at every turn. India strikes you hard: all your preconceptions are inadequate. I found I could imagine slums, beggars, pollution and sheer filth pretty well, but there's a difference between imagination and reality, and however well prepared you are, the real thing makes you think. On the other hand, I wasn't so much shocked as fascinated: I'd been gradually introduced to the squalor of Asia by going from the western world through various degrees of the developing world, and now that I was in the Third World I found I could handle it. I was actually more shocked at my lack of surprise than I was by the squalor itself: I felt almost guilty to be able to accept such shocking scenes without feeling emotional. Such is the effect of long-term travel.

It is true what they say: India is a different world. From the sheer mass of humans to the frenetic pace of life – an almost contradictory combination of rushing

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around like headless chickens and sitting back and doing absolutely nothing, a mix that only the Indians seem to have perfected – it's like nothing you have ever seen before. Calcutta is, of course, a particularly good example of Indian mayhem, and it seems it has always been this way. In 1803 Lord Valentia wrote, 'The town of Calcutta is at present well worthy of being the seat of our Indian Government both from its size and from the magnificent buildings which decorate the part of it inhabited by Europeans. The Black Town is a complete contrast to this as well can be conceived. Its streets are narrow and dirty; the houses… resembling the cabins of the poorest class in Ireland… Chowringhee, an entire village of palaces, forms the finest views I have ever beheld in any city.'

Yes, there's plenty of British splendour under the pollution. And what pollution! The difference between London and Bangkok is as great as the difference between Bangkok and Calcutta, and where Bangkok's haze hung around like a naughty schoolkid, mischievous but not necessarily a real threat, Calcutta's should come with a government health warning. If you manage to find a spot where you can see for a short distance – on the River Hooghly, or in the central park, the Maidan, for example – then, well, you can't see for a short distance. Bridges and tall buildings appear as if they're floating in cumulonimbus, and as for the sun, it's a long-

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forgotten memory. I managed to catch Calcutta in the wet, but the daily downpours didn't shift the smog, and merely added to the chaos.

Calcutta is fairly flat, so when it rains, it's a disaster. The streets are pretty squalid anyway, but I was surprised by the sheer amount of mud in precipitous Calcutta. Whether they're digging up the roads and piling up dirt on the roadside, only to have it wash all over the street, or whether it's a slum area where bitumen is an alien concept, the mud is ubiquitous. Coupled with the rains were temperatures that reflected the season (winter): Calcutta was freezing. I thanked the stars I'd decided to hold on to my sleeping bag, and I snuggled up at night while my roommate, a Frenchman called Eric whom I'd befriended in the airport, froze his proverbials off under a thin blanket.

So the roads are mud traps, the weather is shocking and the pollution solid enough to be claiming squatters' rights, but Calcutta is a fascinating place to explore. Every road holds new thrills, and every attempt to do something fairly simple results in an experience that leaves you dumbfounded. For example, visiting the bank to change my travellers cheques took ages: I knew Indian banks were slow, and indeed we managed to get our cheques changed in a pretty efficient half-an-hour, but watching the man fill out three or four forms, all in triplicate, and then file them round to various people for

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signatures, checks and goodness knows what other bureaucratic niceties, is an edifying sight. The British legacy lives on, but in India red tape has been transformed into an art form.

Images of Calcutta

How can you describe a mad place like Calcutta? I'll simply pick out some of the crazier things I saw as I wandered around the streets, getting splattered in mud, cow shit and exhaust fumes…

- The driving is worse here than anywhere else I have been: Indians make Indonesians look like One Careful Woman Owners. One-way streets simply mean be more careful about oncoming traffic, or, as most Indians interpret them, they mean sound your horn continuously. Come to think of it, sounding your horn continuously is a prerequisite on any street, and Calcutta has to be one of the best places in the world to study the Doppler Effect; indeed, nine out of ten motorbikes have such hot-wired horns that their headlights dim when the horn goes off. Listening to the traffic is like a session at Crusty the Clown's Funny Car Show: horns blare, honk, buzz, fart, whoop, rattle, ring and even screech like sirens, and behind the horns are rust buckets

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that look like they might fall apart at any moment, just like Crusty's special multi-coloured beetle. I'd heard that India was a circus, but I didn't realise it was meant literally.

- There are cows all over the place, acting as natural rubbish hoovers and creating traffic havoc when they decide to sit down and chew the cud in the middle of a main thoroughfare. Cows are sacred to the Hindus – you won't find many beef steaks in India – and they have free rein over the whole country. Hitting a cow with your car is worse karma than running over a human, so cows wander all over the place, leaving havoc in their wake. Never have the rural and urban clashed so strangely as in the rolling meadows of Calcutta.

- Homelessness is a fact of life for a huge number of Calcutta residents, and it's simply amazing how every possible spot of land is used for makeshift tents, hard concrete beds and communal cooking collectives. Beggars tug at your clothes, looking pathetic and insisting more persistently than beggars in Indonesia. There are huge beggar rackets, and giving to Mother Theresa's mission is a much better way of helping the poor, but although you can put the problem

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out of your mind, there's no danger of being able to avoid it. Walking round Calcutta's backstreets is like starring in a telethon.

- The street – indeed, any open space – is the toilet, kitchen and bedroom for lots of people. Everywhere you go there are people pissing and shitting in the middle of the road, people washing themselves at the public water pumps, almost naked and all soaped up, desperately trying to shift the dirt that must be so ingrained after years in the pollution, and people cooking their lunch right next to a drain that houses more germs than a biological warhead. It's no wonder that India is disease-ridden: education about cleanliness is, well, scant.

- But, conversely, there are lots of smart middle class people in Calcutta. One must assume that tucked away in the depths of the city are reasonable housing estates, pleasant flats and relatively unpolluted areas, because the middle class is clean, pressed and eminently presentable, even if a lot of the clothes look like they've been rescued from a 60s retrospective fashion shoot. There's an underground train system, of which only one north-south line is completed, but it's

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efficient and relatively clean, and there are plenty of adverts around for computers, stereos and televisions, while dead dogs pile up under the hoardings, blowing up like cows on Australian highways. It's the contrast between these different ways of life that brings the problem home: if you explore a place where everyone is poor, as would be the case in a poor village in the middle of Africa, the concept of poverty is more palatable, but when you see the incredibly poor and the comparatively well off squashed together on the same pavement, it makes the problem much more obvious, and much more unjust.

- The 450 m-long Howrah Bridge, which spans the River Hooghly, is the busiest bridge in the world, and walking across it has to rate as one of the strangest experiences in Calcutta. The cars, buses and taxis are manic as they converge on the cantilevered construction, and every day 60,000 vehicles drone over the river, as well as an uncountable number of pedestrians. While I was walking over to the railway station to buy a timetable, I saw a taxi collide with a truck, losing its front offside wheel and sparking to a halt in the middle of the road. The truck kept going, the taxi passengers got out and simply hailed another taxi,

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and the taxi driver was left with a wrecked car and an angry bunch of crazy locals all swerving to avoid him and his taxi, none of whom thought it a good idea to stop and help. I left him to it: watching the pilgrims bathing in the river while their friends pissed just upstream from them was entertaining enough.

- Howrah Station, Calcutta's main railway station, is incredible. It's an imposing building housing tens of lines, and trains run from here to every corner of the subcontinent. India's trains are simply superb: a relic from the British Raj, the railways are masterfully run, never run on time but always run, and are the best way to get around this vast country. India has over 60,000km of tracks, and every day 7000 passenger trains run, carrying over 10.5 million passengers and connecting 7100 stations; Indian Railways is also the world's largest single employer, with over 1.6 million staff. Howrah Station is a bustling hovel, with naked beggars sleeping in the middle of the main hallway while porters rush around shouting orders and blowing whistles for no discernible reason. Waiting for a train isn't boring in India: it might be draining, but it's certainly not boring.

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- The railway system isn't the only relic from the British Raj, and being the first capital of British India (the capital shifted to Delhi in 1912) Calcutta has its fair share of pompous Victorian monuments. The most impressive is the huge Victoria Monument at the south end of the Maidan, an imposing white marble monstrosity that sums up the decadence and pomp of the British Empire in one phallic thrust. Out front is a statue of Queen Victoria during her fat-Elvis stage, and inside is a statue of the relatively unknown slim Victoria: if the second statue's anything to go by, she was quite a looker in the early years, so perhaps Albert wasn't such a blind old bastard after all. Still, even in fat old crone mode, Vic's an impressive sight, presiding over a city that's totally Indian and as far from Britain as you can possibly get.

  Inside the Victoria Monument is a very good museum that tells the history of Calcutta, from its founding in 1690 by Job Charnock to the present day. I found it fascinating, and thoroughly enjoyed being bounced around the displays by the Indian tourists thronging to this piece of Raj: Indians thrive on human pinball, and if you're a female you should be prepared for a fair amount

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of fondling in the process. Not for the first time I thanked the stars I was born with an appendage…

- In front of the Victoria Monument and the nearby St Paul's Cathedral is the large grassy expanse of the Maidan. The Maidan is locally known as the Lungs of Calcutta, and it's a very apt description: as you walk through the rubbish, cow shit and fading grass, you can almost hear it wheeze. I couldn't help thinking of the aftermath of the Glastonbury festival, when the rubbish of a hundred thousand stoned revellers is all that remains of the year's biggest music event, and like the aftermath of Glastonbury, there are a number of casualties curled up on the floor in the Maidan. The difference is that most Glastonbury visitors have a home to go to, and it only happens once a year: the Maidan is for real, and it's there every day of the year.

- The Maidan is also home to a large number of sports club: over there is the ICI Sports Club, and tucked away in another corner is The Telegraph Sports Club. It seems amazing to have such a proliferation of health clubs in an area where jogging for half an hour will do you more damage than inhaling liquid tar, but I guess they hail from

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the days before exhaust fumes and chemical pollution. Still, it's probably safer to stay home with a six-pack, a pizza and the remote control than try to improve your biceps on the Maidan.

- At first glance, Indians are a wonderfully friendly bunch, and their English is the best I've come across since Australia and New Zealand. Conversation is still like a customs form – name, occupation, country of origin, length of stay, etc., etc. – but most Indians have enough English for you to be able to have a real conversation after the niceties. This is a delightful change from the Indonesian and Thai syndromes.

  Indian attitudes are, however, baffling. If you have to do something, reserve at least five times the amount of time that you'd need in the West: banks, shops and transport seem to happen at a snail's pace, as if everyone's running through glue. Given this, it's heaps of fun trying to get things done. A friend, Johan from Belgium, was trying to find an Enfield motorcycle to tour round on, and I joined him for an exploratory trip round the mechanical shops of Calcutta. One shop he visited was shut because 'it is raining', and another told him to come back tomorrow because

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‘we can’t find the bike just yet’, despite the fact that he was already coming back from the day before. And ask an Indian whether something is true, and you’ll get a wobble of the head: the wobble can mean ‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘I don’t know’, or any combination of the above. It can frustrate the hell out of you, but it’s a complete hoot if you don’t really care yourself.

- When you do a business transaction, wait until you’re handed your change before giving them your money. This is to ensure that you actually get your change: in a wonderful display of underhand capitalism, you won’t necessarily get your change without a fight, but if you refuse to pay until you have your change, you’ve got a fighting chance of not being ripped off. Quite a few fixed prices and no language barrier make shopping in India much easier than dealing with the cowboys in Indonesia, but there is still plenty of scope for losing out.

- Those things you read about in Indian novels are all here, and they guarantee a fascinating time. Rickshaw-*wallahs*, thin and crusty, struggle along the streets, pulling their rickshaws and passengers through the shit of the streets: it’s a hard life, and

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many die young, but it's a popular service, unique to Calcutta (other cities have more bicycle rickshaws and auto-rickshaws). *Pan-wallahs* sell *pan*, that glorious combination of betel nut, spices and condiments all folded up in a leaf which you chew after a meal, and eventually spit out onto the pavement to create another nosebleed stain in the dirt. Black-red teeth abound, just as in Indonesia, but here *pan* is quite the art form. And every street is lined with little terracotta teacups, smashed into the gutter: when you buy *chai* (tea) from a street vendor you get it in a little cup, which you just chuck onto the street when you've drunk the sweet, milky concoction. It's hygienic, but you can't help wondering where the terracotta ends up.

- The food's great – at least, it is in the main cities. *Dhal* (spicy lentil mush), *chapatis*, Thums Up (sic: it's Indian Coke and tastes like Coke with a spicy kick), millions of types of curry, rice dishes, egg concoctions, breads… I was in heaven in Calcutta. Outside the cities the food can be quite atrocious, but I thoroughly enjoyed learning exactly what Indian cuisine is all about. I spent so long in England ignoring half the menu in tandoori restaurants and sticking to chicken

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vindaloo, pulau rice and keema nan that discovering the sheer range of Indian dishes is a hobby in itself.

- As I walked along the road, umbrella dripping and crowds converging, a local man walked past me, looked me in the eye, and through a cracked and toothless smile shouted, ‘This is India!’ I couldn’t help but agree with him. This is indeed India.

Puri

Written: 30 January 1998

Eric and I rolled into Puri on the Calcutta train on the morning of Thursday 22nd January. The train journey was surprisingly tame: the Calcutta-Puri line is pretty efficient (we only arrived three hours late, not a bad trip) and the berths in the second-class sleeper were comfortable. Indian trains are generally a real experience, but my first exposure to the system was easy and considerably less hassle than the train in Java. One girl had her pack stolen, but we’d been warned of a racket on the Puri Express, and I held tightly on to my bags until we were well into the journey, when I had time to chain them down. Theft isn’t rife in India – not compared to places like Thailand – but it happens,

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especially on popular tourist routes.

Puri was where I rediscovered my *joie de vivre*, a little something that I'd managed to mislay halfway through Indonesia and had only found again occasionally. Sitting in Raju's Restaurant[2], a little roadside café frequented by the travelling community, I began to feel an unfamiliar ache round the eyes: I thought I might be getting ill, I hadn't felt it for so long. Then I realised… my eyes were smiling again. For the first time in ages, I was thrilled to be on the trail. 'This is India!' I thought.

As the skin formed on my super-sweet milky tea, I simply sat there, taking in the sights of rural India. Puri, some 500km south of Calcutta down the eastern coast of the mainland, is a pilgrim town, one of the holiest spots in India for Hindus. As a result it's full of weird and wonderful characters, as well as hundreds of Indian

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[2] A wonderful establishment where the food was good, and the menu was an entertainment in itself. In true Indian style, spelling is an optional extra, and at Raju's you can dine in true dyslexic decadence. Why not try the freshly squeezed *Grage Juice* while you munch on your *Butter Huney Toast*? A bowl of *Museli* in the morning is good for the soul, and the soup range is extensive: *Espinach Cheese Soup*, *Massrum Soup* and that old favourite *Hot & Soup* are all available. Under the heading *Our Cripspy Teat* you can sample the *Spinch Pokara*, and staying on the spinach theme there's *Spinch with Cheese* and *Spinch with Coconut Fry*. Fish lovers adore the *Tunna Stack* and *Lobstar by Order*, and for people who like their food cold, they can check out the *Chilly Chicken*. And if that isn't enough to get the taste buds rolling, you can spend hours trying to decide between the *Macaroni Tomato with Cheese Sauce* and the *Tomato Cheese Macaroni*. What a glorious place!

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tourists, and as the cows wander along the road, eating everything and shitting in the gutter, and the children play cricket in the backstreets, stoned pilgrims meander along the road, struggling through a haze of *bhang*.

For Puri is one of those unique spots where the use of marijuana and opium is not only legal, it's supported by the government: there are quite a few government *bhang* shops dotted around the town where you can buy grass and opium, as well as *bhang*, an edible form of marijuana which you just swill down and enjoy. This is a major draw card for western tourists, of course, but I didn't come across any downside to this availability: Puri is simply relaxed, and everyone seems to be silently satisfied, for some reason…

Puri is not just popular because it's a drug-infested pilgrim town: it also has a beach. The beach doesn't win any prizes though: the inhabitants of the local fishing village use it as a toilet, and go for their daily squat as the sun's coming up, leaving a lovely smell to waft down onto anyone brave enough to sunbathe. However, for the casual tourist the beach holds some wonderful conversations: the salesmen of India know their targets are fixed when they're soaking up the rays, and they come in all shapes and sizes. There was the man selling carvings of positions from the *Kama Sutra*; the massage man; the dropout selling dope, despite government regulations; the salesman for the restaurant up the road;

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and, of course, the stoned pilgrims. One of the latter approached us as we watched the world go by, and among the inane chatter he spouted for over twenty minutes (with no prompting from us, I might add) was this wonderful poem, which sums up Indians quite well, stoned or sober:

> *Life is good when it's sunny; Life is good when it's raining.*
> *Life is good when it's hot; Life is good when it's cold.*
> *Life is good when it's day; Life is good when it's night.*
> *Life is good when it's black; Life is good when it's white.*
> *Life is good when it's easy; Life is good when it's hard.*

…and so on. When we asked him what was so good about life when it was raining, he replied, 'I sleep when it's raining.' Monsoon time is obviously a difficult time for poets.

Non-local Locals

The traveller crowd in Puri were fun, too. John the Mancunian was obsessed with the footy results and, despite extensive travel experience, managed to act in

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character when he described his visit to the bank. ‘So I goes into the bank, right, and hands over me fookin’ twenty pound note, like, and the bloke studies it and says: “I cannot change this, it’s mutilated”. And I says it’s not fookin’ mutilated, mate, it’s just a rip, it’s how they check for counterfeits, you know, by seeing if you can rip through the watermark, it’s standard procedure that is, you ask anybody who works for a bank in England. So I says to ’im: get the phone and I’ll ring the fookin’ Bank of England and prove it, go on, they’ll tell you it’s standard procedure, like, but he bloody wouldn’t. Fookin’ bastard.’ Amazingly John turned out to be a wonderful person after this apparently xenophobic outburst: perhaps not actually living in Manchester for over twenty years had something to do with it.

And then there was Peter, the old English electronic engineer who had been coming to Puri regularly for his holidays and proved a mine of information about the town and how to catch the local buses and trains. Add in a mix of hippies, normal travellers and people who defied categorisation, and staring at the travellers turned out to be just as much fun as staring at the locals.

Well, almost. There are few sights more distressing, and few sights that draw the eyes more, than beggars. The beggars in India are deformed, dirty, and really pitiful: stumps are held out for a few rupees, scabby

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bodies shuffle themselves through the dirt, mumbling for change, and women with flesh sagging from their bones stand around, toothlessly asking for money while you suck on another mouthful of *cripspy teats*. And every night the night watchman walks along the road, blowing his policeman's whistle and making sure the beggars aren't where they shouldn't be: regular whistles mean there's no problem, lots of short, sharp whistles mean something's going on, and no whistles demonstrate exactly why the night watchman gets paid danger money. I only saw one bit of hassle, anyway: an explosive Italian caused a scene in Raju's Restaurant by insulting Raju's brother and generally being a drunken idiot. Not surprisingly the night watchman was nowhere to be seen.

The humans weren't the only activists in Puri, though. Along with the wandering cows were hundreds of dogs: in common with other Asian countries, dogs run wild, spreading rabies and turds, but in India the numbers go off the scale. They normally don't bother humans – unless you're carrying food, in which case they begin to take interest, a scary transition from studied apathy to vaguely menacing stalking – but they sure bother each other, chasing after unwelcome strays and arguing over food scraps and territorial rights. At night the noisy whining of the mosquitoes was only matched by the choruses of whooping and yelping dogs,

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a concentrated effort that made it sound like the dogs of Puri were auditioning for the next Disney flick as the pack of unsavoury characters that always get their comeuppance. Between the canine wailing, the crickets' shrill chirping, the bats' screaming and the early morning nattering of the locals, my earplugs earned their keep.

Trying to Leave Puri

The downside to Indian life hit me on Sunday 25th January. Both Eric and I woke up during the night and threw up copiously, and spent almost all of the next day in bed, making various trips to our *en suite*. Obviously we had eaten or drunk something suspect, but of course it was impossible to tell exactly what. India, however, is a particularly unpleasant place to get gastric complications, because wherever you go people are spitting their *pan* in the street[3], pissing on the pavement, cooking goodness knows what in smoky barbecues, and generally not helping the situation as you stumble down

[3] A true Indian obsession, *pan*, pronounced 'parn', is possibly the most revolting thing I've ever tasted. The equivalent of the betel nut in Indonesia, *pan* is a combination of tobacco, betel nut, lime paste (that's lime as in lime ash, not the fruit) and various strange spices and condiments. It's chewed, and results in huge numbers of red-coloured stains on the pavement as people spit out their accumulated saliva and, eventually, the *pan* itself. It sounds foul, and indeed it is: I tried *pan* in Puri, and the experience lasted about five seconds before I realised it's definitely an acquired taste. God knows who first decided to chew betel nuts, but whoever did started off an Asian craze, 'craze' being the operative word.

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the street, clutching your guts. However, by this stage I'd become pretty philosophical about illness, so when I woke up on the Monday, feeling much better, I decided to make my plans for the next few days.

Those plans involved moving somewhere, so I strutted down to the railway station to make a booking. Indian railway booking offices are an education in chaos, and it's a minor miracle that the bookings, once made, are reliable. I wanted to go from Puri to Warangal, and then on to Hyderabad; when you buy a ticket over for a journey over 500km you are entitled to a two-day break wherever you want, and I wanted my break at Warangal. I queued at the information window, and after about ten minutes I managed to find out that, yes, this was possible, and I should fill in a reservation form and queue at the other window. This queue took only 45 minutes to evaporate – a very short wait by normal standards – but the ticket guy said I couldn't have the ticket I wanted, and I ended up buying a ticket just to Warangal. With Indian Railways, this is par for the course: as if to rub in the almost slapstick vibe of the railways, when the phone rang in the ticket booth, the man picked up one phone and said, 'Hello,' but the ringing kept going, so he picked up another phone and said, 'Hello,' and the ringing kept going, and then he picked up a third phone and said, 'Hello,' and the ringing kept going… and it was only when he pushed a

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button on the third phone that he finally got the call. If it hadn't been for real, it would have been a comedy sketch.

That night I settled down for my last night in Puri, pleased to be making a move in the morning. The move I actually made in the morning was not quite as expected: sometime during the early hours of the morning I began to feel a little nauseous, and come 6am I was back in the bathroom, losing copious quantities of variously digested foodstuffs from both ends of my body. Stomach cramps set in, I felt dizzy and weak, and I realised that there was no way I was going to be boarding a train that morning. Once again, sickness had changed my plans.

By mid-morning things were no better, so I limped out into the morning light to find the manager, who was distressed to find that I had relapsed and rushed off to get me some medicine as I dashed back into the bathroom for another shot at goal. The medicine looked dubious: one sachet was of oral rehydration salts, and I was pleased to note that ORS was available in India, after the fiasco in Rantepao; the other sachet, however, contained some unmarked pills with just a brand name on the packet, and the manager said they would work wonders. I took the salts, but avoided the pills until I knew more about my condition.

I could afford this luxury because our neighbour in

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the hotel, a very kind Swiss girl called Ruth, said it sounded as if I had *giardia*, a nasty little parasite that she had managed to pick up some six months before. Earning canonization in the process, she offered to take one of my stool samples up to the testing station, and after I'd found a use for an empty film canister that I'm sure Kodak didn't have in mind when they invented it, off she went, tepid package in hand. The results confirmed it: I had *giardia*.

Eric saved the day for the second time by going into town to collect some Secnil to kill the parasite, and at the same time he cancelled my train reservation. Meanwhile I sat in bed cursing my luck and altering my plans. Luckily my plans were designed to be alterable, so I spent a profitable convalescence studying maps of India, weather patterns, railway timetables and my guidebook. I rather enjoyed it: sometimes I wonder if organising a large trip isn't half the fun. The extra days spent recuperating in Puri slowed me down, made me simplify my itinerary, and reminded me of my mortality, as if I needed more hints. In retrospect, this wasn't a bad thing: I got better, very slowly, got some letters written, and met a fellow music lover, Danny from Israel, with whom I whiled away the hours talking music. Things could have been much, much worse, and I still managed to get to Hyderabad in the end.

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Hinduism and Indian History

Written: 25 January 1998

In appreciating India, it's extremely handy to have a basic grounding in Indian history and the tenets of Hinduism, as there are very few places in the country that haven't been fundamentally shaped by a combination of theological and historic events.

The Hindu Pantheon

Hinduism has loads of gods – it makes Christianity look positively lightweight. However most of the stories are centred round a handful of big players, and it's handy to know who they are.

It's also worth noting that India's gods look very unlike the local population (unlike in Christianity, for example, where Jesus looks like a normal-looking human being). In no pictures of Hindu gods will you see a moustache, except occasionally on the baddies, such as the *Ramayana*'s evil Lord Ravana; in India you will be hard pressed to find a man without the ratty porn-star look. Hindu gods and goddesses don't worry about flashing their flesh around, and although they keep the nether regions and mammaries well hidden, they always show a bit of leg; in India legs are a novelty, so much so that when I saw foreigners wearing shorts, I'd cringe. And Hindu gods are either white-skinned or blue (the latter applying particularly to Krishna and Siva); Indians

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are neither white nor blue, but this may explain why it is more desirable for an Indian to be born light rather than dark. Anyway, on to the gods themselves…

First up is Brahma, the Creator. His consort is Sarasvati, the Goddess of Learning, and he rides around on a white swan, carrying a musical instrument called a veena in his hands. Brahma is fairly unusual in that he has a head with four faces – facing forwards, backwards and to each side – to represent his all-seeing presence.

Then there's Vishnu the Preserver. His consort is Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity, and he rides around on the mythical garuda bird, carrying a conch shell and a discus. Vishnu has visited earth in nine incarnations, the first six of which were in animal form. However, in visit seven he came down as Rama (whose consort is Sita), in visit eight he turned up as Krishna (with consorts Rahda, Rukmani, and Satyabharma), and for visit nine he was the Buddha (though Buddhists disagree, and that's why the two religions split). For his tenth incarnation, Vishnu will come as Kalki, and will appear riding on a white horse.

The third main god in this trinity – which is often regarded as a representation of one omnipresent god – is Siva the Destroyer (pronounced 'Sheeva'). His consort is Parvati, the Beautiful, and he rides around on Nandi the bull, carrying a trident. Parvati has a couple of other forms, too: Durga the Terrible, when she carries ten

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weapons in her hands and rides a tiger, and the scary Kali, the fiercest of the gods, who demands sacrifices and wears a garland of skulls. A pleasant couple indeed.

Siva and Parvati have two important children. The first, and probably the most popular Hindu god, is Ganesh, the God of Prosperity and Wisdom, who cruises round town on a rat. Ganesh is easy to spot because he has an elephant's head: legend has it that Siva, on returning from a long trip, discovered Parvati in her room with a young man, and without thinking he lopped the man's head off. Of course, the young man was their now grown up son Ganesh, and Parvati forced Siva to bring his son back to life, but he could only do so by giving him the first living thing he saw, in this case an elephant. Life is never easy when you're a god, is it? The other son is Kartikkaya, the God of War.

There are a few other gods, like Hanuman the Monkey God, who crops up in the epic poem the *Ramayana*, and Surya the Sun God, but the above are the essential personalities of Hinduism. It makes Christianity and Islam look kind of short-staffed, wouldn't you say?

A Potted History of India

While we're on the subject of facts and figures, here's a quick discography of India's various empires and civilisations. This is particularly useful when visiting

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forts, temples and so on – history gives these buildings a wonderful dimension.

- **Indus Valley Civilisation**
  2500 BC – 1500 BC
  Notable for originating Hinduism.

- **Aryan Empire**
  1500 BC – 321 BC
  Aryan invaders retain Hinduism, caste system is introduced. Rise of Buddhism from 500 BC, Hinduism contains it by including Buddha as one of its gods (as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu).

- **Mauryan Empire**
  321 BC – 184 BC
  Reaches its peak under the great Emperor Ashoka, who converts to Buddhism in 262 BC. He builds many Buddhist rock carvings and pillars, including Sanchi. Buddhism doesn't reach the south, which remains staunchly Hindu.

- **Sunga Empire**
  184 BC – 70 BC
  Many Buddhist cave carvings completed.

- **Various Buddhist Empires**
  70 BC – 319 AD

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- **Gupta Empire**
  319 – 606
  Much Buddhist art created and buildings erected, but towards the end of the empire Buddhism declines and Hinduism rises in popularity once again.

- **North Splits**
  606 – 1527
  After the invasion of the White Huns, northern India splits up into lots of individual Hindu kingdoms, but is never really unified. The Muslims start to raid India from 1001, with varying degrees of success, eventually establishing the Mughal Empire in 1527.

- **Sundry Empires in the South**
  550 – 1565
  The Hindu empires of the Cholas, Pandyas, Cheras, Chalukyas, Pallavas, Hyasalas and the Vijayanagar Kingdom all flourish at various times and in various places in the south. Also a large number of localised city-based kingdoms thrive.

- **Mughal Empire**
  1527 – 1757
  Great builders and artists, introducing Islam into

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India but tolerating other religions. The Taj Mahal is built between 1631 and 1653, but the power of the empire declines steadily after the death of the last major emperor in 1707.

- **The Marathas**
  1646 – 1803
  The Marathas gradually take over the weakening Mughals' lands, defeating the Mughals in 1757, but a defeat in 1761 by Afghanistan stops their expansion, and eventually they decline and fall to the British.

- **The British**
  1612 – 1947
  First British trading post is established at Surat (Gujarat) in 1612. Others follow in Madras (1640), Bombay (1668) and Calcutta (1690). In 1803 the East India Company defeats the Marathas, leaving only the Punjab outside British control: the Punjab is taken in 1849. In 1816 the British take Kathmandu after initially being driven away by the Gurkhas in 1814; the boundaries of Nepal are drawn up, and mutual respect between the Gurkhas and the British prevents Nepal becoming part of the Indian Empire. In 1857 the Indian Mutiny leads to the

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British government winding up the East India Company and taking over India itself. In 1947 India gains independence.

- **Independent India**
  1947 onwards.

Konark

Written: 24 January 1998

Puri is a procrastinator's paradise, but after a couple of days finding my bearings, I decided I just had to ease myself out of the restaurant-by-the-sea experience to explore the biggest tourist attraction in the area: the Sun Temple in Konark.

A World Heritage site – always a good pointer, especially in India, home to loads of the things – it's a gorgeous sandstone building, smothered in intricate carvings in the way that Hindu temples often are. However, Konark's carvings have a subject matter that is a world away from the seriousness of many other temples: Konark specialises in the (t)horny subject of sex, and other equally essential aspects of life.

From intricate carvings of monogamy in a whole range of positions, to polygamy with varying numbers of women, up to polyandry and plenty of erect penises, Konark was fascinating. Created in celebration of Surya,

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the Sun God, it is aligned east-west and takes the form of a huge chariot, with carved wheels down the side that double as sun clocks. Eric and I took a guide, who delighted in pointing out particularly interesting sculptures, such as the dog licking a woman, and the man with an infected manhood all bundled up in a bandage; he managed to impart a lot of information, despite his heavy Indian accent[4], which made it hard to understand some of the more technical references to sex, an ambiguous enough subject in plain English.

Konark was well worth the visit, even if there were plenty of touts chanting, 'I show you erotic sculpture, very sexy postcards, very nice, just looking, cheap price,' all day long. But then again, there were plenty of tourists, mainly Indians, and where there are tourists, there are the trappings of tourism. Indian tourists, however, are a sight in themselves: smart[5], well dressed and polite, they seem to fail the test when it comes to

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[4] English is the *lingua franca* in India (often it's the only way for two Indians from disparate areas to communicate), but it's not so much English, more Inglish. Take the bobbling accent of the Indian living in England and make it thicker, and you end up with a wonderfully musical sound, something like a muddy tide lapping against a dock pile.

[5] Middle-class Indians are exceptionally well turned out. The men have their standard shirts and trousers, well pressed but drab, but the women are sheer celebrations of colour, with wonderful sarees, golden earrings and necklaces, bangles and ankle bracelets, and a sense of style that's unique and effective. Their hair is always clean and tied up neatly, whether in a bun or the popular plaited ponytail, and is secured with exotic brooches, flowers or pretty hair bands. Seeing how these people live, it's a testament to them that they manage to look so smart, and it's a delight to behold.

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respecting their historical sites. Despite the barriers stopping you from approaching certain areas of the monument, there were plenty of Indians scrabbling over the fragile sandstone; as a result the site is policed by people with whistles who blow like crazy whenever they see anyone climbing where they shouldn't. They don't actually *do* anything, but they do make a lot of noise…

And the bus journey there and back proved that the Indian concept of 'full' is equalled only by the Indonesians'. Jammed on the back seat, I thanked my lucky stars that I'd learned to control my claustrophobia. What a shame my sense of smell is still acute: having your head jammed up someone else's armpit for an hour on the bus isn't my idea of heaven.

Travellers in India

Written: 29 January 1998

There is a depth to the travellers I have met in India that was glaringly absent from the hapless hackers I rubbed shoulders with in Southeast Asia. I spent plenty of time moaning about the saddos I met when I was in Malaysia and Thailand, but for the most part India seems to have avoided the impact of the lobotomised hordes, and it's a richer place because of it.

Take the clientele in Raju's Restaurant, a cross-section of the travelling society in India (though perhaps

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the patrons are a little more esoteric, as Puri isn't as popular a destination as Varanasi, Agra or Goa). The general intellectual level was very good, and nobody struck me as more concerned with beer and 'the way they do it at home' than with slipping into the Indian way of life as smoothly as possible. All sorts of nationalities were present, and most of them were old enough to be interesting, and with one delightful exception – the one which proved the rule – I found my faith in travellers fully restored. I sincerely hope this continues through my travels in the subcontinent: good travelling companions are better than good guidebooks any day.

The exception? An overweight and anaemic English girl with her Turkish boyfriend, whose relational interplay was hilarious and not a little sad. She overruled him at every turn, managing to phrase her decisions very politically in the way that only a possessive lover can get away with: 'Shall we go and sit outside then?' sounds innocent on paper, but when it's expressed in a tone that brooks no argument, it's more an order than a discussion. He acquiesced in a shameless display of weak will, and one can only assume that she was very special in bed, or he was hopelessly lonely. It simply reinforced how lucky I am to have travelled unencumbered for so long.

Oh, and I nearly forgot the Blending Crowd. I'm not

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sure why India should breed more of these strange and faintly amusing characters than anywhere else – it's probably a residue from the heyday of the sixties counterculture and the Beatles' embracing of Indian religion – but there are quite a few westerners who go all out for the Indian look: sarees and bindis for the women (Indian dresses and forehead dots respectively), and kurta pyjamas and woven handbags for the men. I suppose that they think they're blending into the local scene, but there are two glaring problems: they're the wrong colour, and they look stupid. Besides, you can't become a Hindu, you have to be born a Hindu, so even those who go all out to follow Vishnu and Siva are kidding themselves, and won't be allowed into the temples, no matter what weird and wonderful clothes they wear. It's all a bit pathetic, really.

Religious Tolerance

Written: 30 January 1998

I finally boarded the southbound overnight train from Puri to Hyderabad on January 30th. The long journey was considerably enlivened – as if it needed to be, considering the bubbling insanity of India's trains – by a bunch of young Indian zoology students from Andhra Pradesh (the state of which Hyderabad is the capital). One of them, Kiran, was thoroughly interesting: he was

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that rarest of creatures, a non-proselytising Indian Christian.

‘I have a beautiful steel guitar,’ he said, ‘made by a steel factory that was set up as a collaboration between the Germans and the Russians. When the factory closed down, they sold off many items cheaply, and I got a beautiful guitar for only 500 rupees. I was incredibly lucky: I believe it was a gift from God so I could make music and have a hobby.’

Having lost both parents at age five, he suffered from ‘many troubles’ for some time, but he discovered Jesus, and was telling me that he had read the Bible, right up to Mark’s gospel, which he was tackling now. This isn’t terribly unusual in the great scheme of things, but in India, becoming a Christian isn’t just a case of crying ‘hallelujah’ and digging Jehovah instead of Siva and his henchmen, it’s a case of voluntarily ostracising yourself from society. Hindus reject those of their faith who switch to another: after all, you are born a Hindu, will die a Hindu, and that’s all there is to it.

‘The man in charge of the pilgrims in Puri, I was talking to him the other day,’ said Kiran. ‘He’s been unhappy for nine years now and is not finding solace in his Hinduism, so I persuaded him to think about out Jesus, if he can make the change. And this friend of mine, Jaganhadha, has an uncle who changed to Christianity, but he was thrown out by his family: the

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uncle is now prosperous and happy, but the family is in turmoil, and Jaganhadha is thinking of turning Christian too. But it's a hard decision, to discard your family for your beliefs. You must be sure.'

Kiran also had some interesting views on politics and colonialism, and they're worth mentioning. From such people as these you learn much about the country you are travelling in, but the only way to really understand the place is to be born here: it's so different from the West that it's almost another planet.

'We are very thankful for the British,' he said. 'They gave us an education system, the railways, a health system, and a democracy, even if it is very corrupt now. We have not really advanced these since the British left, so without the British, we would have nothing at all.

'Unfortunately, our big problem is that there is much corruption in the government. If the BJP party gets in, things will be very bad for the Christians: consider the story of the Babri Masjid[6]. It's very

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[6] A mosque in the small town of Ayodhya, in central Uttar Pradesh, the Babri Masjid was the centre of a huge controversy back in 1992. Hindus revere Ayodhya as the birthplace of Rama, the popular seventh incarnation of Vishnu, and the mosque was claimed to be standing on the site of the original Rama Temple. Hindu fundamentalists wanted to destroy the mosque and build a new Rama Temple, and the BJP, which is staunchly pro-Hindu and anti-non-Hindu, made it clear that it supported the fundamentalist viewpoint. Confrontation and rioting filled the headlines in 1992, and in December 1992 the mosque was torn down by Hindus, which led to major riots and over 200 deaths. It's not hard to see why non-Hindus fear a BJP government in the next

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difficult: I will have a Zoological degree soon, but I can only work with animals or in the wildlife service unless the government makes more jobs available in that field.'

This brings up two points: colonialism is regarded by some people as akin to philanthropy, and having a degree here restricts you to a specific career path, rather than opening up the job market as it does in the West. Small differences, but important.

And there is hope for India despite its corruption, but then again politics has a way of becoming self-referential (by which I mean if your party appeals to an unsavoury section of society, expect it to backfire on you). Consider this quote from a Queenslander about Pauline Hanson, the chip-shop owner and leader of the Australian party One Nation, whose policies are totally anti-immigration and, essentially, racist (and who therefore has a worryingly large following in rural Oz, a fact not lost on countries in Southeast Asia who regard Hanson as the devil, as does the Australian central government). 'That Pauline Hanson has a lot of good policies,' blurts our man from Queensland[7]. 'I reckon if she was a man, I would vote for her.' Thus we make the bed in which we lie.

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elections.

[7] Still, Queenslanders always were the earthier end of Australia. As they say, 'I have a simple deal with the croc. I don't swim near his home, and he doesn't drink in my pub.'

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Andhra Pradesh

Hyderabad

Written: 4 February 1998

I took an instant shine to Hyderabad, but I'm not sure why. My first impressions when I got off the train were insanely busy traffic, a hot climate and auto-rickshaw drivers who steadfastly refused to use their meters, but the place had something strangely enticing about it[8]. Powering from the station in Secunderabad down to Hyderabad (the two are twin cities, with about 10km between the two centres) I got the thrill of my life leaning into the curves and sucking in my breath as we narrowly avoided yet another bus seemingly hell bent on flattening us into the bitumen. I found a hotel, dumped my stuff, and found a place to eat, thrilled to be somewhere new.

The food was excellent: for the first time I felt I was eating food that came up to the standard of Indian

[8] How many other places can you see a scraggly old git sitting on a dirty red rug, which he's laid out on the pavement and covered with various yellowing sets of false teeth, a couple of mirrors on sticks and a selection of rusty and semi-sharp instruments that would put the ship's surgeon at the Battle of Trafalgar to shame, all of which is tucked away behind a hand-scrawled sign reading 'Teeth Dentist'? It made my root canal throb just to look at it.

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restaurants in England. Hyderabad is the home of *biryani*, the succulent dish that combines rice with all sorts of interesting fruits and vegetables, and needless to say it does it magnificently.

I also came up trumps at the railway station, managing to book exactly the ticket I wanted for Chennai (the new name for Madras), and only having to queue for about ten minutes, a time that would be respectable in Europe. I posted some letters, rang home, and all of a sudden had a whole afternoon to kill, which I did by wandering aimlessly until I reached a hill, which naturally I climbed.

I found Hyderabad spread out below my feet. In the distance were mosques, forts, and a stadium from which speeches in a strange tongue floated over the afternoon breeze. A bunch of lads who had followed me up the hill wandered over and started up a conversation, proudly telling me that there was a rally for the BJP party there that very afternoon, as part of the campaign for the forthcoming elections. That explained the masses of young men marching the streets, flying the party flag and yelping like they were at a carnival: I'd noticed them when a busload of BJP supporters had screeched past me on the main street and the boys crowded on the roof had spotted me, the only white tourist in Hyderabad, whereupon they waved and shouted until they'd disappeared into the melee. Hyderabad isn't

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exactly a hot spot for western tourists: I only spotted one other white face in the entire week I was there.

The Planetarium

Not only was there a great view from the top of the hill, but it also housed a planetarium and science museum, and interested to see what an Indian science museum might hold in store, I paid my 18 rupees for a combined museum and planetarium ticket and marched through the doors. It was more interesting for the people than the displays: most of the science area was given over to the sort of hands-on exhibit where you press a button, pull a lever, look through a hole and try to work out what on earth you're supposed to be looking at, and not surprisingly the place was teeming with kids. Interestingly the adults were having just as much fun playing with the exhibits as the kids, but as soon as I walked in, things changed. Apparently a western tourist is much more fun to play with than a bunch of scientific experiments – look, the funny white man shakes your hand if you hold it out to him, what a blast! – and I spent most of the time shooing away persistent urchins, who would delightedly push the buttons and pull the levers for me, and then have the cheek to ask me for ten rupees. The only place I got any peace was in the basement.

The basement was a bit of a surprise. Hardly

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anybody went down there, and despite this being a science museum, most of it had nothing to do with science at all. Apart from a number of interesting Hindu sculptures and paintings, the basement was given over to the private collection of some erstwhile benefactor, and the main bulk of the collection was made up of porcelain figures. There I was, in the depths of southeast India, wandering through rooms full of limited edition Royal Doulton and Wedgwood, thinking that we both felt like strangers in a strange land. And for the first time in my life I actually enjoyed looking at porcelain figures: despite an awful lot of crud, there were some delightful pieces, including one particularly skilled set of dancing ladies from the 1930s, in which the body-hugging dresses looked so realistic and suggestive that I couldn't quite believe that they were made from the same stuff as coffee mugs and toilets.

The basement might have been quirky, but the planetarium was even weirder. The content was fairly standard – 'Look how these stars make up a bull… yes, kids, I know it looks nothing like a bull, but, look, it *is* one, OK? Little shits, I don't know,' that sort of thing – but the voiceover, pronounced in impeccable Indian English by a professor who sounded like Dan Maskell mixed with Mahatma Gandhi, made all the difference. I sat amazed as I learned about the 'mye-thology' behind the constellations, the huge galaxy in 'An-drom-ee-da',

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the exploration of Mars by ‘Nay-sa’, and everybody’s favourite, old ‘Edgy Wells’ himself, who wrote a famous book about the invasion of earth by the ‘Mar-shee-yuns’. Add in the millions of schoolkids on a field trip, the poor girl two seats down from me who threw up halfway through the show (and with whom I thoroughly sympathised), and the little bastard who kept kicking the back of my seat every ten seconds, and it was a planetarium as only India knows how.

And just to rub my face in it, I lost my sunglasses during the show: they slipped out of my pocket, and I didn’t notice in the darkness. I mention this because I lost six pairs of glasses in 1997, and this pair was my seventh. I’d even gone to the unfashionable trouble of wearing a band so they couldn’t fall off my neck, but stupid-bastard me shoved them in my pocket, forgetting that I’d lost every single other pair by doing the same. I might be able to cross continents, but I simply can’t hold onto a pair of sunglasses. It’s uncanny.

Museum Madness

On Monday 2nd I visited the Salar Jung Museum, a huge rambling building full of dull rooms of paintings, pottery, metalwork, jade, clothes… all the usual exhibits, but presented in a way that only Indian museums can manage. Everything looks as if it was set up in the days of the Raj and has been left exactly the

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same ever since, without a hint of upkeep: dust accumulates, colours fade, displays get slowly destroyed by meddling Indian tourists… it's a sad sight, but tucked away in the bowels of this lumbering beast were some beautiful gems, such as the incredible collection of ivory carvings from all over India, and the room of ancient manuscripts in Arabic languages, detailing the holy scriptures of Islam.

The museum was also affected by the scourge of India's tourist attractions: the Indian day tour. Mostly frequented by Indian tourists, a day tour is an incredibly cheap way of seeing huge numbers of attractions in a very short space of time, and as such I avoided them like the plague. In Hyderabad, for example, one tour takes you to the Buddha Purnima, the Qutab Shahi Tombs, Golconda Fort, Salar Jung Museum, Mecca Masjid, Charminar, the zoo, a handicrafts emporium, the planetarium and the Birla Mandir, all in one day. I took over three days to do the same, and I avoided the zoo and handicrafts emporium, thankfully.

This explains the human whirlwinds that plough through the museum at regular intervals. There I was, examining yet another collection of Royal Doulton and Wedgwood, when I was forcibly flattened against the glass case while a bus load of chattering Indian tourists flew past, scanning the exhibits in much the same way that the tourists did in the Aboriginal Culture museum in

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Kakadu. Next time I heard the approaching maelstrom I ducked into an alcove, escaping death in much the same way the bull runners do in Pamplona.

I then walked south to Charminar Gate, which is shown on every packet of Charminar cigarettes, one of India's favourite brands of filterless smokes: the catch phrase on packets of Charminar cigarettes is 'Nothing else really satisfies', which is true if your definition of satisfaction is coughing up a greeny every morning when you kick start your lungs. The gate itself is impressive: blocking the traffic pretty effectively, it looms over the surrounding bazaar and gives the winding backstreets a flavour of Persia, with its Islamic minarets and characteristic arches. Just up the road is the Mecca Masjid, one of the largest mosques in the world, said to cater for 10,000 worshippers. It is, however, far from the most impressive, and after wandering around and being stung for some *baksheesh*[9] by a con man who

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[9] *Baksheesh* is a uniquely Indian concept. A strange combination of bribe and tip, *baksheesh* isn't viewed as a luxury only rich people can afford, it's simply the way to get thing done. If you're waiting at the bus stand, and every bus that goes past is hopelessly crowded, slip the conductor some *baksheesh* and you'll end up with a prime seat. If the train is full, some judicious *baksheesh* will get you a seat and, if it's humanly possible, a berth. If you're staying in a hotel for a few days, surreptitious use of *baksheesh* can ensure you always get served promptly and courteously: without, you may end up not being served at all. If you get arrested, *baksheesh* often works instead of an official fine. *Baksheesh* is an integral part of life, and although it strikes westerners as strange to have to bribe your way through life, here it's the social norm, and you'd better get used to it. The problem is that there are plenty of people who demand *baksheesh* for doing nothing: the skill lies

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pointed out to me a particular stone that was supposed to be from Mecca itself – who knows if he was telling the truth – I scurried back to my hotel for a hot shower.

The next day I completed the collection of tourist curios on offer, wandering up to the Birla Mandir, catching a boat out to the Buddha Purnima, and lazing in the public gardens after an exhausting visit to the murky Archaeological Museum. The highlight was the Birla Mandir, also known as Sri Venkateshwara Temple; perched above the city, this modern white marble Hindu temple is simply beautiful, catching the sunlight and lighting up the hilltop with its intricate carvings and golden tower. I felt more comfortable than usual wandering barefoot round the sacred pathways: a sign at the bottom made it perfectly clear that this temple was open to everyone 'regardless of race, creed or caste', a nice change after the normal practice of banning non-Hindus from the inner sanctum. I even felt easy taking snapshots, as the day tour masses swamped the monument with their instamatics and herd-like push-and-shove. Often, as a stranger in a strange culture, I feel a little anxious, conscious of my ignorance of local etiquette, but when there are lots of other Indian tourists, I feel fine: they manage to stamp all over their own heritage so comprehensively that the polite reticence of the conscientious westerner seems almost reverential in

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in intelligent and inoffensive discrimination.

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comparison.

The Buddha Purnima was pleasant too; it's a 17.5m-high statue of Buddha perched on a platform in the middle of the city's huge Hussain Sagar lake. I took a boat out to the statue and back[10], and it was easy to understand how disaster had struck when the statue was being installed. The barge carrying it to the island had capsized and the statue, a bloody huge piece of stone, had sunk to the bottom of the lake. Luckily a salvage team managed to bring it back up unharmed, despite its two-year sojourn in the depths, but they couldn't bring back the eight people who'd gone down with it. It completes the tripartite of Hyderabadi religion: the Islamic Masjid Mecca, the Hindu Birla Mandir and the Buddhist Buddha Purnima.

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[10] The boat departed from a recreational garden set next to the lake, which wasn't notable so much for its landscaped gardens or amorous couples canoodling under the neem trees, but more for its rubbish bins, the first I'd seen in 16 days in India. But don't get the impression that Hyderabad is any cleaner than any other Indian city: on the way back from my walk, I wandered past a man from the council who was trying to unblock the drains. In the West this would all be hidden behind one of those cute little stripy tents that gives the workmen enough privacy to drink as much tea as is humanly possible in the working day, but in India there's no need for privacy: the concrete slabs that passed for manhole covers were slid to one side and the man, clad only in a short dhoti tied round his midriff, was trying to shift the blockage by sticking his leg down the hole as far as it would go and wiggling his foot. Just as I walked past he pulled out his leg, all smothered in faeces the colour of the outback and the consistency of porridge, and just down the pavement a man was pissing against the wall, under a sign declaring the nearby shop to be a pharmacy. Is it any wonder the mortality rate is so high?

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And as for the Archaeological Museum, yet again I became the main exhibit as family after family engaged me in lacklustre conversation about what I thought of India, what was my name, where did I come from and so on. I began to get the feeling that all this repetitive conversation was going to drive me nuts in much the same way it had in Indonesia, but where Indonesian conversation was strictly census stuff and rarely strayed into conversation about Indonesia itself, Indian conversation is more like a job application form, with questions like ‘Why do you want this job? What are your good and bad points? Do you have any other comments that might affect your application?’ attached to spaciously empty white boxes. The set pieces of ‘What is your name?’ and ‘What country?’ soon give way to questions like ‘Why have you come here? What do you think of India? And do you like Indian girls?’ all of which are general enough to elicit responses beyond the monosyllabic. It might still be an interview by numbers, but at least it’s an interview, rather than a monologue.

Golconda

Written: 1 February 1998

After a couple of days exploring Hyderabad I decided to head off to nearby Golconda Fort, one of the most

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magnificent fortress complexes in India, and some 11km west of Hyderabad. Most of the fort dates from the 16th and 17th century when the Qutab Shahi kings ruled the area, and just down the road are the flashy tombs where the kings and their relatives are buried.

A reasonably quick and astoundingly bouncy bus ride saw Nick and I to the main gate of the fort, where kids touted the services of the myriad cafes and restaurants cluttered round the entrance. After a Thums Up to shake off the effects of the bus we paid our two rupees to get in, bought a little descriptive map of the area, and shrugging off the persistent guides who managed to speak such quick and unfathomable Inglish that it would have been a patent waste of time to take them, we stepped through the main gate and into the Golconda complex.

It took my breath away. Perhaps it's my English heritage, but forts hold a special place in my heart, even if I haven't actually visited many. I first noticed this when reading James Michener's *The Drifters* while crossing the south Pacific, a distinctly castle-free area: his description of the fortresses near Marrakech made me want to get off the boat and head straight for them (though, come to think of it, reading about anywhere made me want to get off that bloody boat). Golconda Fort sits astride a large hill, surrounded by semi-desert, and the buildings cover a huge area round the base of

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the hill. I was in heaven.

While exploring this wonderland of turrets, towers, mosques and minarets (the builders were Muslims) we stumbled upon the ubiquitous gaggle of kids, and they latched onto us in time-honoured fashion: ‘Give me five rupees!’ they cried every time we so much as moved a toe.

Initially we tolerated them – hell, at first we probably even encouraged them out of politeness – but before long it was getting tiring, and I had to put on my best fake-angry voice and tell them to *chelo*[11]. To be honest they were quite lively and entertaining, but there’s nothing that ruins an ancient, mediaeval atmosphere as comprehensively as crazy kids.

And what an atmosphere! From the citadel at the top of the hill the scale of the fortress is apparent: inside the inner walls are the ruins of the fortress proper, and between the inner and outer walls, visible in the far-off distance, lies a still-thriving city. Over there, some kids playing cricket in a park; to the east, schools and houses; in the north, more industrial-looking buildings; and beyond, a dry, dusty landscape that reminded me of pictures from Mars.

I could imagine the king sitting on his citadel, watching the invading Mughals approaching from the

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[11] This means ‘go’ or ‘push off’, hence the grave insult *chelo Pakistan*, literally ‘go to Pakistan’, the Indian equivalent of ‘fuck off’.

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horizon, kicking up clouds of dust as their horses marched on: even with the usual Indian tourists milling around and defacing the property – quite literally in the case of one idiot, who was carving his name into the wall right under a sign proclaiming that what he was doing was illegal – Golconda was simply fantastic.

The Qutab Shahi Tombs

The Qutab Shahi Tombs were a short walk through some little villages and winding streets, with their white-washed walls, Muslim locals and stagnant open drains: it felt a bit like Greece, except for the dirt and squalor that characterises India.

The tombs themselves are an intriguing mix of the old and the new: the old buildings, domed and distinctly Islamic, soar into the cloudless sky, while the new gardens round the tombs play host to the Indian equivalent of Sunday afternoon down the park. While the bones of the kings lay dusty and long-dead in their stone sarcophagi, the locals played cricket, bounced rubber balls off the tomb walls, and blasted loud Hindi pop music out of tinny ghetto blasters, all turned up to full volume.

If the kings and their kin thought they'd be resting in peace in their pleasant gardens, they couldn't have been more wrong: if I was a Muslim, I'd be mortally offended by the treatment the tombs get from the locals,

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although it has to be said that Hyderabad does have a very large Muslim population, more so than the national average.

In fact, the city is unique among southern centres in that its most common language is Urdu, not Hindi or a local dialect[12]: certainly, women clad in black robes with full *burqas* are common. And for once the *burqa* has a use: it doubles as a face mask, which is not a bad thing given the pollution in Hyderabad.

If we thought we'd be able to explore the gardens in the tranquillity normally reserved for cemeteries, we couldn't have been more wrong. I used to have an urge – a fleeting urge, as most budding guitarists have at some stage – to be a rock star, but now I've had quite enough.

At every turn, locals would flock to us, holding out

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[12] There are 18 official languages in India, and over 1600 minor languages and dialects dotted around. This is one reason for the retention of English despite over 50 years of independence, because for two Indians from opposite ends of the country to communicate, they'll probably have to use English. Hindi is the official language of India, but down in Tamil Nadu, for example, nobody speaks it, they all speak Tamil; indeed, most states have their own, individual language. Urdu is interesting because although it's an Indian language, developed in Delhi and the state language of Kashmir and Jammu, it was adopted early on by the Muslims, so it's written in the scratchy calligraphy of Perso-Arabic script and contains a number of Persian words. Another interesting one is Sanskrit, the ancient language of India: it is, I suppose, the Indian equivalent of Chaucerian English, and is the language of the Hindu *Vedas*. But despite all these different ways of expressing yourself, there still doesn't seem to be any way of expressing the concepts of 'punctuality', 'efficiency' or 'peace and quiet' in Indian, and there probably never will be.

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their hands and going, ‘Helloo, how yoo?’ Seemingly desperate to be shaken by the hand, they’d grab our hands, after which they’d look at their friends and grin, as if touching a foreigner was something cool and kind of kooky.

It was fun at first, but just as a can of Coke is perfect and a two-litre bottle is too much, the novelty soon wore off. Still, I reflected, the locals were thoroughly friendly, delighted to see visitors, and a sizable number of them could hold a reasonable conversation in Inglish. That’s not so bad.

Back in Hyderabad

That night I watched the sun setting over the city from my hotel roof, noticing that hidden away up there was a large pile of empty whisky and lager bottles, most wrapped in brown paper bags, all stacked in one corner of the roof. Andhra Pradesh used to be a dry state – it now has some bottle shops around, I noticed – and alcohol isn’t drunk in public, so I’d obviously stumbled on a favourite supping spot for alcoholic visitors. It was a good spot too: as the sun dipped below the horizon, Golconda stood out in silhouette in the distance, and the various mosques cast long shadows as their evening call to prayer echoed out. For some reason, it felt like the Middle East.

And I felt like some sweets, to round off the

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evening: I'd already had a delicious tandoori chicken down the Punjab Restaurant, and with a fully restored appetite, I wanted more. So I went down to the sweet shop, asked for a 500g box of various sweets and retired to my room to write some letters and munch on this culinary experiment.

Good lord, the Indians like their sweets sweet. My first bite into one of the sweets made my teeth ache in anticipation of decay, and they'd waved the white flag and signed a peace treaty by the time I'd tried all the different types. Most were quite disgusting – yoghurt is nice in a pot or a drink, but when your fudge tastes of yoghurt, it feels as if something's gone wrong – but a couple were rather enjoyable, so I flagged them for future reference and tried to sleep through the sugar rush. At least that explains my dreams that night…

Hyderabadi Conversations

Written: 4 February 1998

In Hyderabad I realised I had booked my ticket to Chennai a day too late; I checked the timetable and found I wasn't due to leave until seven o'clock that evening. Having exhausted Hyderabad's main attractions, I moved onto its next claim to fame, its food. According to the locals, Hyderabad invented *biryani*, that gorgeous combination of fragrant rice and

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vegetables that's so popular in England, and even if this is stretching the truth, they've certainly mastered the dish. Chicken *biryani* never tasted so good, and I decided to spend my extra day eating myself stupid, finding the best restaurant in town, the Paradise Garden Restaurant, and parking myself there for an extended lunch. God, it felt good.

But it wasn't just excellent cuisine that my midday splash furnished me with; it also provided me with much food for thought. Seated opposite me in the distinctly middle class dining room – where most people spoke Inglish over their *hors d'oeuvres*, and a few even spoke English – were two well-dressed and well-pressed young men. Inevitably, as it always does in India, the census chatter gave way to the subject of money: how much did my ticket cost, did I find India cheap, what did my job pay?

'Tell me, what would be a good wage in London?' one of them asked.

'Hmm. Well, I guess a decent wage would be £20,000 a year. You could live in London pretty comfortably on that, and even more comfortably if you lived outside London and commuted,' I replied.

'What do you earn?'

'Hard to say, really. I'm a freelancer, so my earnings aren't fixed. That's the price you pay for such a pleasant lifestyle. What do you two do?'

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‘We are programmers. Cobol.’

‘And you work here in Hyderabad?’

‘Yes, but we have been offered jobs abroad. We can go to London and earn £36,000 in a year there.’

I sucked in my breath: that was nearly double the salary of the job I’d quit to go travelling. ‘Wow! I’m in the wrong job…’ I said.

‘But we go to America instead, me to Kansas and my friend to New Jersey. The wage there is US$50,000 per year.’

‘I think you’ll find you’ll probably manage on that…’ I volunteered, wondering how to consolidate this with the beggars dying a slow death in the septic sewers of the city outside.

The flip side of the coin turned up in a conversation that invaded my privacy as I wandered the two hours back from the restaurant in Secunderabad. He just appeared: one minute I was enjoying a peaceful stroll past the Hussain Sagar, and the next I was answering census details once again.

‘Where you from?’ asked the young man, who introduced himself as Rumi Siddqui. He had a clean, folded handkerchief in one hand with which he constantly dabbed his unshaven chin and wiped his lips. It was a faintly disturbing sight, more suited to an obese and sweating man twice his age.

‘England,’ I said, not exactly keen to become

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embroiled in another Inglish conversation.

‘You married?’

‘Nope.’

‘You Christian?’

‘Yes, I suppose you could say that.’

‘I am Muslim. How old you?’

‘Twenty-seven. How old are you?’

‘Twenty-one.’

‘And are you married?’

‘No. But I always look after girls. You know any girls in England who want to marry an Indian? Can you bring me to your country and find me an English girl? Not many English girls come here.’

‘Er, no, I don’t think so. If an English girl wants to marry an Indian, there are plenty in England to choose from, you know. We have lots of Indians in England.’

‘I am interested in travel, like you I think. Can you help me to get to your country? When you are home, can you talk to someone to help me?’

‘No, it doesn’t work like that. You have to go through the embassies and get visas and stuff. I’m no use at all.’

‘You perhaps go home and send me a visa.’

‘I don’t think so. There’s nothing I can do. About all you can do is emigrate, or marry an English girl.’

‘Your girls at home, they are easy, no? When you ask for fuck, they give fuck?’

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‘Hell, no! That’s just what you think, watching all those stupid American films and soap operas. If you really want to know why English girls don’t come here alone, it’s because the locals think they’re only after one thing and keep going up to them with such subtleties as “Do you want a fuck?” Women in the West are far from easy, take it from me.’

‘But they wear many flesh, much short clothes? Always showing off and flirting?’

‘Well, they don’t exactly wear *burqas*, but no, they don’t show any more flesh than the women in Singapore, for example. Besides, every Indian woman I see shows off the flesh round her waist, and women in England don’t tend to do that so much. Then again, Indian women always wear sarees down to their feet, and western women show off their legs more. Two different areas of the body, two different approaches, but no real difference. Muslim women are different, but Hindus aren’t really.’

‘But all your women have AIDS, right?’

‘Are you kidding? There’s more AIDS in Asia than there is in Europe and America. Have you ever been to Bangkok?’

‘Hmm. I hope you do not mind me talking like this about your country. I try to find out, and often I am mistaken, for which I apologise. [Pause]. You have any brothers?’

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‘Yes, one brother and a sister.’

‘Ah, one brother.’

‘And a sister.’

‘Yes. A brother. What does he do?’

‘He’s a lawyer.’

‘Ah.’

‘And my sister’s a student.’

‘Your brother is a lawyer. That is good.’

‘Do you have any brothers or sisters?’

‘I have four brothers. They are all engineers and one is going to America.’

‘And do you have any sisters?’

‘Four brothers, yes.’

‘No, do you have any sisters?’

‘One sister, but she’s married. Four brothers.’

‘Four brothers. I see. And are you an engineer too?’

‘No, I start work as a motorcycle courier on Friday.’

‘Ah, so you’re going to be one of those crazy biker-men, eh!’

‘Yes. See over there, that’s traffic police headquarters. There many bad people pay big money for not having insurance or licence.’

‘I see.’

‘I have no insurance or licence either.’

‘But you’re about to become a motorcycle courier!’

‘I avoid police, then. We go in here and have tea, yes? It is good to be talking to you.’

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And so it went on. I put him right about a few misconceptions about the West – we're not all rich, we don't all shoot people, we don't all have extra-marital affairs, and we don't all eat cows and pigs for every meal – and tolerated his Islamic sexism; I learned a lot about Indian perceptions of the West, and bid Rumi a warm goodbye with a promise to send him a postcard on my return. He at least deserved that, especially as he'd refused to let me pay for the tea…

The Indian Film Industry

Written: 4 February 1998

At this stage it's worth mentioning yet another incredible Indian institution: the Indian film industry. Rumi's stereotypical image of western women had come mainly from American movies, which seem all the more lewd and free loving because Indian movies don't even show kissing, let alone nudity. But what Indian flicks lose in censorship, they more than make up for in sheer exuberance.

Bombay is the official centre of Indian film, so much so that the films are known as 'Bollywood' movies (which is unlikely to change to 'Mollywood' with Bombay's name change to Mumbai). Bollywood churns out twice as many films every year as Hollywood, and where the average Hollywood

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blockbuster clocks in at about 90 minutes, Bollywood epics run to an exhausting average of two-and-a-half hours. Each movie has at least five sing-along dance routines, and every type of film genre – action, romance, thriller, crime and musical – is packed into the celluloid equivalent of bubble and squeak.

To a westerner the films appear incredibly crap, but the figures point to an industry that is far from unsuccessful. Bollywood blockbusters, of which there are more than 800 produced every year, have million-dollar budgets, produce over 100 million ticket sales every week, have huge advertising campaigns (the posters mount up on walls and telegraph poles, only to be nibbled off by passing goats and cows) and have made a lot of Bombay residents very rich indeed.

The actors, once in the big time, are made for life. The men are moustachioed podges who all look identical, and the women are rotund and coyly flirtatious: this excess of weight denotes prosperity in much the same way it does in Polynesia. Once an actor or actress makes it, he or she will end up acting in loads of films, all at the same time: stories of actors working on over 100 films simultaneously are not uncommon, because it's actors that sell films. Directors also spread their talents thinly: one successful director was so overbooked he directed his movies by phone. And if an actor or actress becomes well known for a certain

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‘device’, they tend to use that device in every film they star in; thus, if Ursula Andress was an Indian film star, they would find an opportunity for her to slink out of the sea in a black bikini and knife belt in every one of her movies.

The plots also leave a lot to be desired, at least as far as the western film critic goes. To the untrained eye (and ear) Bollywood films are formulaic, to say the least. There is a handsome hero and a beautiful heroine, normally from different classes, as well as an evil seductress and a villain. The hero has a friend, who falls in love with the seductress and manages to change her ways, and in the end good always conquers evil. Mixed into this less-than-thrilling piece of screenwriting are the sing-along pieces, which spring up with a spontaneity and inappropriateness that even *Fame* has trouble beating. The action scenes are never far away – fights break out so quickly you’re left wondering what sparked them off – and involve plenty of martial manoeuvres and overdubbed grunts and groans. The romantic scenes are renowned for their lack of content rather than their promiscuity: one film I heard about had two lovers embracing, about to go for a kiss, and just as the dirty deed was to be shown the scene cut to romantic orchestral overtures and a picture of the Eiffel Tower thrusting manfully into the sky. With Bollywood, you just have to use your imagination.

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But it’s not hard to see the reason for such repetitiveness in theme and presentation. The audience in India must be one of the most varied and diverse cross-sections of mankind ever to go to the movies, so to get big ticket sales, you have to appeal to everyone. So there’s no sex, which would offend the more pious pundits; no heavy historical or mythological themes, which would annoy the revisionists; no specifically regional films, which would restrict the audience on geographical terms (films about the Mughals wouldn’t be popular in the deep south, since the Mughals never reached there); films about the western world would only appeal to educated people, and they don’t make up the masses; yes, the common denominator is sing-along action romance, and it’s everywhere. There are some arty films that are successful abroad, but as they normally concentrate on poverty and real life, Indians don’t want to watch them: they want escapism at the flicks, just like the rest of us.

And, truth be told, Bollywood reflects the country itself. Colourful, noisy, brash, romantic, coy but seductive, festive and larger than life, watching an Indian movie is the next best thing to being here. It’s a *poor* second, though…

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Music on the Brain

Written: 4 February 1998

It was in Hyderabad that music lodged itself in my brain and refused to let go. When I go on long-distance walks I tend to get a song into my head right from the start, and it keeps rattling round my cranium in time to my steps, all the way through to the end of the walk. For some reason Hyderabad kicked off the same process, and I found myself remembering snatched melodies and memories from ages past.

The most telling indication that I'd been travelling for too long came as I was reading a new purchase, *Video Night in Kathmandu* by Pico Iyer, a reasonable travelogue about Asia and how its culture is being changed by the West[13]. I came across this highly accurate line: 'If the great horror of travelling is that the foreign can come to seem drearily familiar, the happy surprise of travelling is that the familiar can come to seem wondrously exotic.' Totally unbidden, the opening

[13] For some reason I find some travelogues faintly depressing, because other people's exploits always sound so much more interesting than your own. Amusing and earthy travelogues I adore, but those that detail incredible events that are unique and impossible to repeat – such as travelling in country X before country X becomes ruined by tourism, or stumbling into a piece of paradise in a country that has now been ravaged by war – make me a little sad and not a little jealous. This is annoying: I find myself falling into the trap of travel competition – 'my trip's better than your trip, na na na na na' – and I hate that. Why is it so hard to appreciate that what you yourself have achieved might be fairly impressive, and that this isn't a competition?

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chords from the Eagles' 'Hotel California' started up in my subconscious, so loud that I had to put the book down and listen.

The astounding thing was that, despite 'Hotel California' being one of the most radio-friendly and overplayed songs in the history of market-oriented soft-option cosy-lyriced country-rock, in my brain it sounded fresh. Yes, as Don Henley sang, 'Down a dark desert highway/Cool wind in my hair,' it felt original, fresh, almost inventive. I couldn't believe it: this was the musical equivalent of watching yet another repeat of the *Morecambe and Wise Christmas Show* and finding oneself surprised when Angela Rippon pushes away the news desk and reveals not only glorious legs, but a serious talent for dance. I couldn't believe it: indeed, the familiar *was* beginning to sound wondrously exotic.

But 'Hotel California', alas, didn't have the staying power to bug me for more than a few minutes, and as I watched the sun set once again over Hyderabad, I started humming the song that had been haunting me ever since I'd it again in Singapore. 'I'm sitting in a railway station/Got a ticket for my destination,' warbled Paul Simon. 'On a tour of one-night stands/My suitcase and guitar at hand/And every stop is neatly planned/For a poet and a one-man band/Homeward Bound, I wish I was/Homeward Bound…'

I wouldn't shift that one until I finally got home…

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Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry

Chennai

Written: 8 February 1998

Incredible thought it might seem, Chennai, the fourth biggest city in India, is almost pleasant. The traffic's comparatively light, the slums are only moderately squalid, there aren't many beggars, the pollution isn't solid enough to pose an ornithological challenge, the buses only ooze people at rush hour, and most surprisingly of all, there are *underpasses*. It's quite amazing.

Well, it's amazing after Calcutta and Hyderabad; Chennai (which was known as Madras before the Indians fully developed their fetish for renaming British-named settlements) is on its way to becoming an urban hellhole, but it hasn't got there yet. OK, it's not quite paradise – crossing the rotting Cooum River by footbridge is an exercise in breathing steadily through the mouth, and cows still manage to create traffic chaos and cow-pats simultaneously – but I was expecting another full-on Indian city, and instead I found I could stroll through the traffic without the elements of luck and prayer so essential in other cities. And I even managed to change money at the bank *instantaneously*,

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which was a first.

But the price to pay for all this easy living is boredom. It's as if Chennai is situated beyond the event horizon of some nearby black hole; nothing seems to happen here. You can count the interesting sights on one hand, and if you're after a good time after dark, think again; Tamil Nadu's strict licensing laws make popping out for a beer simply depressing, the only option being the dark subterranean permit rooms where drinkers guiltily sup their evil concoctions while looking forward to the special hangover that only Indian beer seems capable of producing[14]. I arrived in Chennai at 9.15am – astoundingly the train arrived a full five minutes *early* – booked into a hotel, and by 4pm I'd seen all the sights, managed to change some money, done some window-shopping, and had found myself wandering aimlessly. This was not what I had expected.

The Sights of Chennai

Yes, Chennai is a city without attractions, despite its history as the first major British settlement (dating from 1639). Apart from two interesting colonial building complexes, Chennai is a collection of shops, banks, rickshaws and heat, but it has no spirit and no soul, and

[14] Although it's followed closely by the hangover produced by Thailand's Mekong whisky, a concoction that doesn't quite turn you blind, but tries very hard.

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the people reflect this in their manner; whereas in Hyderabad I couldn't move for hellos and smiling waves, the people of Chennai have perfected the art of staring right through you with that specially unnerving blank look reserved by lunatics and government politicians. I smiled, and the only people who smiled back were the educated and young middle class business-*wallahs*, and of course the school children, one group of whom spotted me, surrounded me and gave me a quick lesson on how to play hooker in a scrum[15].

Take Fort St George, one of the two colonial areas in Chennai. Its history is long – it was first used as a fort in 1653 – and the on-site museum is worth a look. But the large walled complex is now used for various government departments, such as the Secretariat and the Legislative Assembly, and when you visit you constantly feel as if you're poking your nose into business that not only doesn't concern you, it might land you on the wrong side of the bars. From the ominous sign proclaiming a small windowless room by the entrance to be the 'Frisking Point', to the Burt Reynolds look-alike guards who prowled round every corner, I felt as if I would have my camera whisked away from me and the film unceremoniously pulled off the spool as I clicked a picture of St Mary's, the oldest surviving

[15] And tried to charge me two rupees for the pleasure, the little bastards.

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British church in India (built in 1678-1680) and the place where Clive of India was married. Indeed, as I walked up a flight of stone steps in the vain hope that it might afford me a more photogenic view of the tree-clad church, one of the guards whistled me down with a growl, and my heart missed a beat; I shot back down to ground level faster than you could say, 'Bail is refused.'

Still, if I had been strong-armed into the lock up, at least I would eventually have ended up in what I found to be the liveliest spot in Chennai. The High Court building, a glorious red maze of spires and Saracenic towers that was built in 1892 and is said to be the largest judicial building in the world after the courts in London, was bustling with barristers (all in the traditional long black cloak and white two-piece tie). From the look of things plenty of locals had realised that the only way they were going to make their lives more interesting was to break the law, and failing that, to go and watch someone else get their dues in court. I could sympathise; leaving the day-glo buildings behind, I wandered through Chennai's equivalent of Piccadilly Circus – Parry's Corner – where nothing particularly interesting was happening; there wasn't even a cow sitting in the middle of the road, chewing the cud and catching out the unlicensed. I slumped back to my hotel[16] to make plans

[16] My hotel was memorable for the grubby little signs on the wall of each room that said (and I quote exactly):

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for the morrow.

And there I met Howard, a lone traveller from Manchester who declared that he was travelling round the world to find out whether or not he liked Johnny Cash's 'A Thing Called Love'. This was as good a reason as I had ever heard, so we teamed up to tackle Tamil Nadu; first stop Mamallapuram.

Buying Music in India

Written: 7 February 1998

In Chennai I ended up cracking under the sheer pressure of window-shopping for a day. I'd wandered into town with the intention of browsing through the shopping malls, checking out the street stalls, exploring the markets, but not necessarily to buy anything: after all, everything I buy I have to carry around, and I've got

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ATTENTION!
Guests Are-Advised
To be CAUTIOUS
of Strangers at Hotels Around
Who Coax you for
A Dance-Party-or-Something Like
They are Troublesome
Manager

The hotel was also memorable for the huge rats that inhabited the lower-floor bathrooms, so large that the resident cats studiously avoided the area. Some enterprising traveller had even chiselled away at the letters 'BATHROOM' above one particularly inviting hole to leave 'RAT ROOM', an accurate observation if ever there was one…

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enough junk already.

The music shop came up and clubbed me on the back of the head before I could reach out to defend myself. ‘Cassettes’ it blurted from its windows: ‘CDs’, ‘Latest Hits’, ‘Videos’, and realising that losing myself in the rows of tapes would be a good way to kill a couple of hours, I strolled in. I went in poor, and I came out rich.

Flipping over a tape to check the price, I balked. One hundred rupees for the latest Oasis album: that’s £1.60, not a lot of money. I looked further: classic tapes were Rs75, new ones around Rs100, even double albums crammed onto single tapes for Rs100. I considered buying a few to be able to play on borrowed Walkmans, and then I spotted an innocent and downright cheap-looking box in the ‘Accessories’ section: an Indian copy of a Walkman, clocking in at Rs400, begged me to give it a home, and for one heady moment I realised I could have a stereo and a bunch of tapes for little more than the price of one CD in London. I chose carefully, and walked out of the shop with an excitement akin to a child’s Christmas Eve. The Walkman even had a speaker, perfect for those lazy afternoons sitting out on the verandah.

So, I’m back in the music. The range was pretty good, especially as far as sixties and seventies classics were concerned, and I clutched the following happy

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albums in my mitts, ready for an afternoon of sun and song:

- The Beatles – *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*
- Simon and Garfunkel – *Greatest Hits*
- U2 – *Achtung Baby*
- Pearl Jam – *Vitalogy*
- Oasis – *Be Here Now*
- Pink Floyd – *The Wall*
- Crowded House – *Recurring Dream (Very Best Of…)*

Armed with the above and a book, I managed to laze my way through Friday, and that night ended up staying up into the wee hours with a wonderful group of other travellers, radically altering my plans for an early Saturday departure. Madras might have been mundane, but I loved every minute of it: thank goodness for other travellers in India. And when your schedule is as free as mine, changing your plans is as easy as rolling over and hitting the snooze button.

Slowing Down

Written: 10 February 1998

India is beginning to slow me down, as if I'm walking

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through treacle. I've had schedules and plans to help me along since I left Sydney back in the heady days of inexperience, and India's no different, but for the first time, I'm utterly disinterested in rushing round everything on my list: I seem to spend most of my planning sessions dropping things from the itinerary, rather than adding them.

It's India, you see. The concepts of 'mañana', 'whenever' and 'siesta' don't need to be spelled out: taking however long it takes is the philosophy, and if you don't roll with it, you'll be run over. Buses arrive when they arrive; trains depart when they pull out; banks change cheques when they change them; beggars die when they die; cows sit down when they get tired; the electricity works when there isn't a problem. The suited executive from the Land of the Transit Lounge would lose his mind in Indefinite India, but for the long-term traveller it affords the opportunity to glide into another timeline: if the world of the West is a well-oiled machine, India is a Heath Robinson contraption whose purpose is unclear, performance sporadic and schematics fascinating.

The places make India, the people make India, the atmosphere makes India, and rushing around from place to place only manages to change a journey of discovery into the pandemonium of those ten-sights-a-minute guided tours. This is more than a little pointless, surely?

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I have learned more about India and seen more amazing sights by sitting down and watching the circus pass through town than I have by zooming through the hills by bus or train. The journeys are interesting, but the destination is more so, whatever the guidebooks say about 'getting there being 90 per cent of the experience'.

But there is a downside to all this slow living. Waiting for an hour for your morning pot of coffee isn't unusual, and getting tea instead of what you ordered is even more normal. Asking a question like 'Is the sea always this rough?' will get you the less than useful answer 'Sometimes'. Asking whether there is a bus to the next town elicits the ambiguous 'It's possible'. And the ubiquitous head wobble can mean yes, no or maybe, depending on quite how it's done, leaving the novice westerner flummoxed[17] and more confused than before.

Still, if you just smile at people, they grin back, dope-fuelled eyes as red as butter chicken. The Indians spend a lot of time staring into space, as do a lot of the western visitors, so it's not hard to understand why

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[17] And sometimes angry too. Howard, for example, would get quite irate with the Indians, sometimes culminating in the accurate summary, 'I fookin' hate fookin' Indians, they really piss me off sometimes, they're just fookin' useless!' Luckily I've been able to roll with it as far as it rolls, but poor old Howard seemed to get all the bad luck: while I was travelling with him he never seemed to get what he ordered in restaurants, he always got stared at (probably because he shaved his head), he always ended up in the bus seat next to the dribbling weirdo or in the ladies' section, and not surprisingly it got on his nerves. As he said, 'Any nation who worships an elephant and a monkey must be up the bloody spout anyway.'

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things don't get done. As we walked to see the Five Rathas (a lovely collection of small rock temples just outside Mamallapuram), this crazy man lurched at me, making a grab for my hat, and as I ducked to one side, he lost his balance and tumbled onto the pavement, smashing his coccyx on the concrete. He passed out there and then, but it woke me up: he was still unconscious when we went past him again. Even the police raid[18] during our last night at the hotel was happy: we grinned aimlessly as they fired census questions at us, and they went away satisfied and probably wondering why we were smiling so much. But it worked.

So I find myself leaning into the wind, wading through the surf, crawling uphill: use whatever metaphor you like, I'm thoroughly getting into the Indian way of life, taking in their timescale, and probably losing a bit more of my western self in the process, which is no bad thing…

It's the most intriguing and interesting time I've had in my life.

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[18] Not entirely surprisingly the police were investigating the room previously occupied by the Indian Soap Opera crowd.

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Mamallapuram

Written: 11 February 1998

Howard and I finally boarded the bus south from Chennai to the temple beach town of Mamallapuram (previously known as Mahabalipuram, another bloody name change in a land that is confusing enough without dithering about what to *call* things). Mamallapuram is best known for its rock temples and pretty little beach, but these days it's as popular for its travellers' scene as anything else.

The bus was incredibly packed. I had a little kid sitting on my feet (and eventually falling asleep there) while I hung onto a handrail for dear life. Luckily it was a short one-and-a-half hour journey, and the clean sea breeze of Mamallapuram was heaven as we stumbled out of the bus. We found ourselves a nice cheap hotel, and sauntered off to the World Heritage Shore Temple on the beach.

It's another quite beautiful example of intricate rock carving, and even though most of the detail has been sandblasted away by the coastal weather, it manages to retain an air of mystery, even when the coach loads of Indian tourists are scrambling over the walls and picnicking under the signs declaring, 'It is forbidden to bring eatables into this site.' Dating from the Pallava period of the late seventh century, it's a highly photogenic place, as long as you don't take any shots

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looking south down the beach, where a huge nuclear power station churns out goodness knows what into the Bay of Bengal. Not surprisingly I didn't swim in Mamallapuram, lest I be bitten by a gently glowing three-headed tuna with a PhD in Astrophysics.

Tucked away behind the town, away from the beach, is the most wonderful collection of rock-hewn caves and stand-alone temples. Palm trees soar from cracks in the huge boulders strewn around the area, and wandering round in the blistering heat, you come across tiny, inviting shrines with their cool interiors, huge spires of ancient places of worship, and mounds of steps cut into the rock. It's quite beautiful, a wonderful example of Hindu rock art, and uniquely different to the temples in Konark and Hyderabad; they also have a different flavour to the stunning rock temples of Ellora, though without a doubt Ellora has the edge.

But Mamallapuram must have been *designed* for relaxation. Beer was relatively expensive, but still affordable: take Marco Polo Beer, at 8.75 per cent one of the strongest available in India, which came complete with the warning 'Liquor ruins country, family, life' emblazoned on the label[19]. The seafood was glorious and some of the safest in India, having been irradiated even before it was caught. And on returning to our hotel

[19] Surprisingly, it didn't say, 'Liquor ruins country, family, life and the whole of the next day.' It should have done.

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at some god-awful hour, we came across a huge family gathering – argument or party, we couldn't tell which – and ended up in conversation with this astoundingly stoned old Indian, whose eyes bled red and whose sentences weren't remotely in the right order. It would have freaked me out if I hadn't been struggling through a haze of country, family and life myself, and that night, drifting off to the sounds of Indian insanity down the corridor, I thought to myself once again, 'This is India!'

And with the Rose Garden Restaurant offering a *Breake Fast* of *Scrumbled Egg* on bread, of which you could have one slice, two *silces* or three *sileces*, I felt right at home in sunny Mamallapuram.

Pondicherry

Written: 12 February 1998

Pondicherry threw me from the first second. Rising on the morning of our departure from Mamallapuram, we grabbed a quick two-*silce Breake Fast* and headed for the bus stand, where an almost empty bus was waiting, proclaiming 'Pondy' on the front. Empty buses don't exist in India, but there, in front of us, was one with leg room *and* space for luggage, and not only was it empty, but it took only an hour and a half to do the three-and-a-half hour stretch south to Pondicherry. It quite unnerved me.

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So we arrived in Pondicherry earlier than expected, still reeling from an efficient service, and wandered about the streets in a bit of a daze.

Pondicherry town is part of the tiny, scattered Union Territory of Pondicherry, which contains the four little French pockets of the country that were only bequeathed to independent India in the 1950s. Pondy is supposed to be the place where France meets India, but initial impressions are of a place overwhelmingly Indian, where paint still peels and the dust still blows. There's still the waft of stagnant *merde* wafting *sur le vent*, and plenty of local characters *qui faisent de toilette* in the middle of the street; *le canal* through the centre of town is more like a slow trickling sewer, and *le parc central* plays host to plenty of characters from *Les Miserables*.

But after a while you notice the little things: Pondy isn't exactly *Pont-de-cherie*, but the French influence is still visible. The water front, though not exactly French, is not exactly Indian either; the police sport red *gendarmerie* caps; crumbling cathedrals hide down broad, leafy boulevards with names like *Rue de Dumas* and *Rue de François Martin*, while cafés sport names like *Bar Qualithé* and *Le Rendezvous* and sell dishes like *poulet au beurre d'ail avec riz blanc*; and the French area, sandwiched between *le canal* and *la mer*, is spotlessly clean with little men cleaning the streets with their witches' brooms. On the other hand, when a

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rickshaw driver tried his usual, ‘Hello sir, want rickshaw?’ and I replied with, *«Non merci, je veux me promener. C’est un beau jour et Pondicherry est une petite ville, n’est pas?»* he just looked confused and shuffled his feet.

The French influence is probably most noticeable when it comes to the availability of alcohol, as we found out when Howard and I visited the *Bar Qualithé* for a few beers in the company of Matthew, an American we’d met *en route*.

The price of beer is exceptional, even if the beer isn’t: stocks are always low in India, and we managed to drink our way through the bar’s entire stock of Kingfisher, Haywards, Black Label Lager[20] and Cannon 10000 in only four beers each. Before we knew it last orders were called at 11pm and a drunken fight broke out between a couple of low-tolerance Indian patrons and the management; not surprisingly, the management won, as they do the world over at closing time.

The menu had looked good, too, though after we’d perused the available dishes for about half an hour, the waiter happened to mention, ‘All we have is rice and noodles, I hope that’s all right,’ which was a shame as I was dying to try the *Green Piece Soup* and *Finger Chipes*. And as we wandered home through the dark

[20] The bottle of Black Label was ominously labelled ‘The taste you grow up to’. This was, of course, only two letters off the real story.

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streets between the French and Indian areas, we came across a huge collection of bodies, sleeping peacefully on the pavement, in the nearby park and outside a set of gates labelled ‘Pondicherry Maternal Hospital’. On closer inspection every one of the bodies was a pregnant woman, most of whom were closer to the labour pains than to the conception. That’s definitely not the sort of thing you’d see in Paris.

Whatever, one thing’s definitely the same in Pondy as in France: they drive like maniacs, and often on the right-hand side of the road. Not that they’re supposed to in India…

Trichy

Written: 15 February 1998

It wasn’t tricky to get to Trichy, just time-consuming. Trichy, whose full name Tiruchirappalli is never used by anyone outside of the railway bureaucracy, is an interesting and bustling town in the central south, and its sights were well worth the severe shuddering of the bus from Pondicherry.

Trichy’s two main attractions are the Rock Fort Temple and Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple. The first one is interesting because it’s perched on top of a huge hill of smooth stone, dominating the town centre much more convincingly than the nearby Church of Mother

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Lourdes (which would otherwise be the centrepiece of the town); and the second is famous for its huge *gopurams* (the pyramid-shaped towers that form the gates into Dravidian temples) and seven sets of concentric walls, all of which are open to non-Hindus except the very last.

The Rock Fort Temple was fairly impressive, but after Golconda a rock fort has got to be pretty outstanding to merit more than a mention: the 437 numbered steps to the summit were more interesting for the groups of pilgrims and tired school children resting there than for anything else, but the view from the top was well worth the climb. Trichy lay around with its slums and sanctuaries, its sewers and shouting salesmen, and in the distance the huge *gopurams* of Sri Ranganathaswamy soared above the palm trees. If it hadn't been for the inanely invasive conversations of the stoned pilgrims hanging around the inner sanctum, it would have been a glorious place in which to sit and contemplate, but in India you simply can't expect peace, so I talked total rubbish back.

In fact, I have formulated a foolproof plan for dealing with confused and confusing individuals. They say something to me and I fail to understand, so I smile and quote song lyrics back to them. They look slightly fazed, but undaunted try something else, and back flies another lyric. This can go on for quite some time, and

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eventually they decide you're worse off than them, and wander off. The best thing is that they always think you're being really sociable, and compared to the usual brush-off, I am. Indians, I just *love* 'em.

Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple

Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple is another place where peace is but a memory. With seven concentric walls, 21 *gopurams* and a total area of 2.5 square kilometres, the temple shocks with its scale alone, and the fact that the biggest *gopuram* on the outside wall is a monstrous 73m high makes it hard to miss, and worth not missing.

Walk through this *gopuram* and you'll discover a whole city crammed into the narrow streets. There are bazaars, houses, election rallies, beggars, cows, dust, sun, more *gopurams*, smartly dressed women, barber shops, dhoti-clad men, flies, rickshaws, loud music, buses, deafening speeches: everywhere are people, people, people, all doing *something*, even if it's just sitting on the wall, watching the world going by, and spitting out half-chewed *pan*.

We engaged the services of a temple guide, and it turned out to be well worth the money. With it being such a huge complex you could wander around for ages without really knowing what the hell was going on – and even with a guide it was far from clear exactly what everyone was doing with their coconut-smashing and

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water-sprinkling – but at least we managed to glean some information. The complex is dedicated to Vishnu, so there are plenty of statues of deities like Rama, Krishna, Hanuman and other figures from the *Ramayana*, as well as characters from the legends of Vishnu's other avatars, and everywhere seems to have a little quirk built in.

For example, there's a niche in the wall halfway down the western side of the seventh temple, and if you shout your name there – or, more accurately, if the guide shouts an Inglish version of your name there – it echoes around the long corridor, and is supposed to bring you good fortune. And there's a little stone slab inside the sixth wall with two footprints and, in front of them, five little holes; if you can put your feet on the prints, stick the five fingers of your right hand into the holes, and lean over to your left until you can see the statue at the end of the corridor, then you'll go to paradise. Having tried it, it's probably just a way of screening those who are too stoned from reaching nirvana… and there are plenty of people wandering aimlessly around the temple who couldn't even manage the five-finger trick, let alone the leaning.

Take the resident fruitcake, who spotted us round the back of the sixth temple wall and decided we would be good fodder for a monologue. Staring through his one good eye, the other swirling in the murky milk of

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cataracts, he started an oration in Tamil that not only meant nothing to us, it meant nothing to our guide.

‘Is he mad?’ Howard asked our guide.

‘No, his mind just changed,’ the guide replied, shaking his head knowingly.

‘Too many drugs?’ I asked.

‘There are many ways to change your mind,’ replied our guide with a look in his eye that totally failed to clarify the issue.

Meanwhile the madman was warming to his theme, even as people gathered around us to laugh at his meanderings through the inner recesses of his confused mind. His monologue invited discussion, so I broke in with a wave. ‘Words are flowing off like endless rain into a paper cup,’ I said in the same way I would have said, ‘Let’s do lunch next Thursday,’ and for a split second he seemed to understand.

But unfazed, he continued to rant, filling up the paper cup until it spilt. ‘Never mind,’ I said, ‘a soap impression of his wife which he ate and donated to the National Trust.’ For a moment Lennon’s insights seemed to strike a chord and he looked slightly dazed[21]:

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[21] This is not just an Indian phenomenon. There are plenty of westerners wandering around the continent who have spent too long in an ashram (an ashram being a retreat set up by a guru), and some of these people, though by no means all, can be a real handful. Ashram casualties come in a number of flavours, but they have one binding characteristic: they make no sense whatsoever. Most of them seem to be rejects from the sixties and seventies: indeed, a western writer I met

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but whatever he had discovered wasn't the answer, so he launched an angry tirade against something that obviously bothered him a lot. 'It's possible,' I replied, 'but I am the egg man, they are the egg men, I am the walrus, goo-goo-ba-joob', and he snapped to a close, staring at me as if I'd just asked if he knew any good burger joints in town. I wobbled my head as we left him behind, him holding up pieces of half-eaten coconut and shaking them menacingly at the sky.

The other sights of the temple – amazingly carved pillars with clever designs that looked like both elephants and bulls depending on how you looked at them, with a few *Kama Sutra* carvings thrown in for good measure – were equally bemusing, and all around were bodies sprawled on the floor, though whether the inactivity was a result of mind-bending herbal remedies or a lack of effort, I couldn't tell. Whatever the reality, Sri Ranganathaswamy was a blast.

Drinking in Tamil Nadu

As was Friday night. In time-honoured fashion we elected to pop out for a quick beer after our evening meal, ending up in the Bar Paradise, a downstairs

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in Chennai said that when he first travelled in India back in the seventies, people never talked about beer, backpacks or beaches, the only topics of conversation were which guru you were going to and which ashrams you'd visited. India in the seventies was evidently full of people who wanted to have their magic pie *and* eat it.

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cubby-hole where the only lights available came in bottles and the atmosphere reeked of schoolboy rule-breaking. As I've mentioned before, Tamil Nadu is fairly unimpressed with the concept of alcohol (as in most of India, marijuana and alcohol have the reverse roles that they do in Europe), so they make you drink it behind firmly shuttered windows and doors, preferably underground, and definitely not beyond 11pm.

The three bottles of Haywards 5000, then, went straight to my head, seeing as I hadn't been drinking regularly enough to build up any tolerance. The conversation migrated to include a local Indian called Rajiv, who proved to be an interesting and very well spoken find. A law advocate, he was a Muslim who was in love with a Hindu girl, but the affair was proving to be almost impossible to maintain, as the scars of the 50 stitches dotted around Rajiv's body proved. We rode back to our hotel on the back of his gorgeous Enfield, played cards for an hour or so, and he went back to his life of law and lawlessness. Chalk up one more intelligent and witty Indian whom the system is systematically battering into the ground…

Thanjavur

Written: 14 February 1998

Saturday morning's head hurt, and I nearly ended up

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doing nothing all day in a lethargy of recuperation, but a couple of minutes back in the madness of India, and I was raring to go. There's just no better pick-me-up than live insanity on your doorstep.

Howard and I parted company as he boarded the southbound bus from Trichy to Madurai, but I had one more mission to accomplish before following him: I wanted to check out another World Heritage site in the town of Thanjavur, an hour-and-a-half east of Trichy. So I wandered around the bus stand, asking the grey-uniformed bus conductors where the Thanjavur bus was, and rather unusually got nothing but blank stares. I think my inability to be understood was down to the fact that Thanjavur is known to some people as Tanjore, the foreign name for the city. Armed with this titbit of info, I managed to find the right bus.

But it didn't actually go to Thanjavur, of course. Instead it stopped at a dusty bus terminal in the middle of nowhere, another bus ride from Thanjavur itself, but Indians being Indians I didn't mind one bit as friendly faces directed me first over there, then over here, then to that bus on the other side and finally to the town bus that promised to take me to the town centre. Almost unbelievably I ended up in central Thanjavur, exactly where I wanted to be.

My first visit was to Thanjavur Palace, a ruined and crumbling old collection of huge stone walls, ancient

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buildings, temples and towers. The view from the top of the bell tower was magnificent, looking right over a local cricket match, and as I wandered through the streets of the old palace I came across the first wave of the Thanjavurian Welcoming Committee. As pretty as a picture and dressed in an immaculate saree and accompanying accoutrements, there was little Priya, surely no older than eleven, but speaking perfect and polite English. We chatted, and I met some of her friends, all of them smiles with legs, and having dashed her hopes of getting a school pen or some chocolate[22] I let her try on my hat and shades, transforming her from a potential heartbreaker into a crusty old long-term traveller in the blink of an eye. Five minutes later I was surrounded by a gaggle of gushing girls, each wanting to try out these new clothes and gigging at each other as the hat covered their eyes. It was delightful.

And the Thanjavurians continued to be amazingly friendly, even more so than the people in Hyderabad. At the World Heritage Brihadesvada Temple I stumbled into a group of young boys who insisted on having their photograph taken with me, and as I wandered round the stunning complex of Cholan architecture I fell into conversation with a man called Krishna, who happened to be a tour guide from Kerala over in Tamil Nadu on

[22] These, among others, are the universal demands from Indian children. Adults are a bit more hopeful: they ask for visas.

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his holidays. He managed to smuggle me into the Hindu-only interior of the temple, where a huge Siva *lingam* sits, and we explored the temple together, with its towering 63m-high *gopuram*, a huge stone Nandi, two (live) elephants to bless the pilgrims as they entered, and stone carvings that stand up there with Java's ruins and Thailand's Buddhist shrines.

Ambling back to the bus stand, I came across two interesting sights, the first of which was the election. With election fever running wild, it didn't surprise me to come across the usual blaring speeches and chanting crowds, but what did surprise me was the scale of the operation in Thanjavur. Not far from the temple was a crowded arena where the speeches were being passionately made, but not content with the microphone and speaker set up normally employed, the organisers had also rigged up loudspeakers throughout the whole town, so wherever I walked, I could listen to the rants and raves of the local political sect. People cheered, some stood around listening and chewing, and the whole town seemed caught up in a democratic feeding frenzy, with heaving buses groaning along the street, crammed to overflowing with ecstatic supporters of some party or other shouting out their support.

And during this riot of opinions I noticed the second thing: the women of Thanjavur. Little Priya was just the embryonic version of the Tamil woman, and as the men

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got caught up in their games of politics and barracking, the women glided on by, gleaming in their colourful sarees, glinting nose studs and tinkling earrings. Indian women aren't as naturally beautiful as, say, the Polynesians, but Indian ladies have a grace that's hard to define. They seem immensely proud of their womanhood, they strive to look smart against all the odds, and where their men look simply drab, they look radiant. Couple this with the severe beauty that a large number of the women possess, and you have an eye-catching sight that is as uniquely Indian as coconut bras are Polynesian and cowboy hats are American. India is at once a celebration of femininity and a disaster for feminism.

The *coup de grace*, however, was a gargantuan obesity of an articulated bus-cum-trailer that was home to a group of touring Germans. I saw them as I left the temple, advancing on all fronts towards the shoe-minding stall, cameras cocked and guidebooks unsheathed: luckily they arrived after I'd managed to soak up the atmosphere of Brihadesvada and was about to leave, so I wasn't caught up in the stampede. However, as I hammered down the pothole-strewn road on my Trichy-bound bus, I looked to the side to see the very same bus powering along in the slow lane, and although *they* had nobody crushing themselves to death in the aisles, our Teutonic friends all looked pretty

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bored, to be honest. How shocking to think that clinical air-conditioned tours can even manage to suck the thrill out of India.

I'll Have a Limca, Please

Written: 13 February 1998

If you had been sitting in the Trichy restaurant where Howard and I were attempting to eat on the evening of Friday the 13th[23], you would have heard the following conversation. (It was incidentally a restaurant where you could get that old favourite *Mull, Gatwany Soup*, the somewhat cannibalistic-sounding *Spanish with Lamb salad*, the cryptic *S/C/Veg Soup*, the classic *Chicken Maynice*, the not very popular *Spetish Meat Bolles*, the world-famous trio of *Chicken 65*, *Chicken 95* and *Chicken 8&8*, the amazing *Gobi Butt Masala*, and to round it off, *Venilla or Straw Burry ice cream*[24].)

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[23] You might think that Friday the 13th might explain events in the restaurant that night, but you'd be wrong. Every day is this weird in India…

[24] Many thanks to Vijai from Kochi, who emailed me with the translations for some of the above. *Mull, Gatwany Soup* is obviously Mulligatawny Soup, and *Spetish Meat Bolles* is evidently something to do with meatballs, but I'd never have worked out that *S/C/Veg Soup* is Sweetcorn and Vegetable Soup. As for *Spanish with Lamb salad*, Vijai said, 'It certainly sounds ominous, and I think it's there for the exotic sound of its name; the locals don't care what's Spanish about it, they just like to see the word there.' And finally, *Gobi Butt Masala* elicited this response: '*Gobi* is cauliflower. Butt sounds like someone's idea of a stupid joke, meaning nothing in Tamil.' Thanks for helping out, Vijai; now all I need to do is work out what the numbered chicken means…

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‘And to drink, sir?’

‘I’ll have a Limca, please.’

‘Sorry sir, no Limca.’

‘Do you have any Teem, then?’

‘No Teem, sorry sir.’

‘Do you have any lemon drinks at all?’

‘Just lemon soda, sir.’

‘Hmm. What bottled drinks do you have, then?’

‘We have Limca, Teem, Coca-Cola…’

‘Limca, eh? How about that. Yes, I think I’ll have a Limca, please…’

It’s all part of the charm of restaurants in India. Will you get what you order? Will they manage to add up the bill correctly? And will you ever find a restaurant where they have more than two menus to share between the whole restaurant? It’s possible…

Madurai

Written: 17 February 1998

After another long bus ride from Trichy, passing some wonderful landscapes and huge rock formations on which the locals had thoughtfully painted adverts for tea bags and soap powder, I arrived in the city of Madurai, home to yet more temples and a bustling bazaar scene. Seeing as I was back on my own again, I decided to pre-empt the loneliness blues by treating myself to a few

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nights at a mid-range hotel, namely the US$5-a-night Hotel Aarathy. My room had a television that, after a few deft manipulations of the tuning controls revealed MTV and CNN; it had a hot water shower; it had a balcony; and it had a view over a wonderfully colourful temple across the street.

Unfortunately, this was still an Indian hotel. My sheets were fairly shoddy (and never actually got changed, despite my requests and *baksheesh*), the fan had a death rattle and the speed control was stuck on gale force, there were millions of little red ants everywhere who delivered a particularly irritating bite, and the hot water was only hot when it felt like it (which was not a crisis in the tropical heat, but I wanted my money's worth). And even when you book into a mid-range hotel, you don't get away from Indian intrusions: one of the things that really bugs me about Indian hotels is that you will *never* get an uninterrupted lie in, because at some stage in the early morning (between 7 and 8.30am usually) there will be a knock at the door, and not your usual discreet knock, more a battering. Sometimes, if you ignore it, it goes away; sometimes it's accompanied by the cry of '*Chai*! *Kaafi*!' and you can yell back a 'No thanks you bastard' for a bit of peace; but my experience in the Hotel Aarathy was fairly unique and not a little confusing, if only because the rooms were equipped with phones which could have

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been used to call up the services on offer if I *had* been interested in a morning tea.

My door buzzer went off at 8.30am, which the Indians consider to be halfway through the day (after all, when you don't have a television, bars are taboo and you can hardly afford electricity, what else is there to do at night except try to create another kid and have an early one?). I ignored it, and it buzzed again. Realising my slumber was irreparably shattered, I slipped on my sarong and stuck my head round the door. 'Yes, what?' I asked rather brusquely, hair sticking out like a briar bush.

'This is the laundry man,' said one of the two men standing in the corridor, indicated his companion. 'He's been here since six o'clock,' he continued, obviously assuming that this would clarify matters. I must have looked pretty blank, because he pointed at the man behind him again and said, 'Laundry man.'

Perhaps this was my clean sheet, at last, but I wasn't interested. 'No thanks, no laundry' I said and closed the door in their faces, infuriated that my relaxing start to the day had been shattered. I checked out later that day and moved into a place that was less than half the price: it still had a hurricane fan but this time there were no ants. It didn't have MTV either, but one night of Indian pop was enough to cure my TV-blues for some time.

I also bumped into Howard again and checked out

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Madurai's main temple with him. Sri Meenakshi Temple is pretty damn big and has loads of towers, all painted in a beautiful rainbow of colours: the outer four towers are particularly tall (the largest is 50m high), and have literally thousands of sculptures of Hindu deities catching the sunlight (the western *gopuram* alone has 1134 sculptures covering it). Inside, the temple is mostly undercover rather than open plan, with dark, incense-filled rooms, messy stone shrines, elephants blessing devotees and a background smell that's hauntingly familiar. My last temple for a while, Sri Meenakshi was both beautiful and dingy, and was all the more interesting for its inherent contrasts.

And all the while, the election was creating havoc across the country. A total of 48 people died in Coimbatore (in western Tamil Nadu) in various weekend explosions and arrests, and I thanked my stars that due to the staggered polling system (implemented so the security forces could travel around the country to police the voting without being too spread out) meant Madurai wasn't voting until the next weekend. I would still be in a voting area then, though…

Kodaikanal

Written: 26 February 1998

Kodaikanal is a hill station. This peculiar brand of

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colonial creation is increasingly popular with tourists, but Kodaikanal is still fairly embryonic as far as tourism goes: sure, there are plenty of wealthy weekenders paddling about on the lake, but there are none of the high rise hotels that have ruined similar places.

Hill stations were devised by colonialists as places to get away from the monsoon's heat and humidity: being high up, settlements like Kodaikanal (about 2100m above sea level) don't suffer from the crazy climates of the plains, and can support a much more European array of flowers, trees and pleasantries like mosquito-free boating lakes and forest walks. For the traveller the hill station affords an opportunity to stop sweating and take it easy for a while.

There is a downside to the weather though: it gets bloody cold, the water is freezing, and quite often you can spend the whole day shrouded in cloud, transforming walks with beautiful views into monotonous trudges through the mist.

However the mix of India with the cool weather and rolling landscape more than makes up for any inconvenience: as with Indonesia's Dieng Plateau, Malaysia's Cameron Highlands and Thailand's Chiang Mai, the effect of breath-condensing temperatures on the local culture goes a lot deeper than is immediately obvious from the woolly jumpers and balaclavas sported by the inhabitants.

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On my second day in Kodai I moved out to Pampar Puram, a little village some 40 minutes' walk from the town centre, a fact that rubbed itself home as I walked back from town in the pitch black of night, the country lanes swirling in impenetrable fog like something out of a Sherlock Holmes story. After the comparative luxury of the city hotel scene, living in a country farmhouse (owned by a farmer called Jerayam) was both a return to roots and a wonderful opportunity to escape whatever urbanite demons were chasing me.

The rural ruggedness of the village with its little *chai* shops, dirt roads and roaming cows and dogs made procrastination a very attractive deal. My plans slowly slipped away into the ether as the timescale of Pampar Puram settled in: Kodaikanal, only a few hilly kilometres away with its tourists, buses and sculptured lakeside setting, might have been on the other side of the planet for all I cared.

The walking was good. I wandered around lakes, up hills, into forests and through villages, savouring sights like the plantations of fresh-smelling Australian blue gum trees, and pretty-as-a-picture cottages with lovely British-era names like 'Ingleby', 'Plymouth', 'Park View', 'Clavarack', 'Central House', 'Lakeside' and, rather mysteriously, 'Bolton'. Kodaikanal didn't feel like India, but it was definitely Indian, just another example of how amazingly diverse this country is.

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Images of Kodaikanal

Of course, very little actually happened during my extended stay in Pampar Puram: that's the whole point of taking time out relax in a quiet haven. But just for the record here are a few highlights of my stay in the hills…

- I met an equally laid-back Swiss traveller called Niko, and together we explored lakes, valleys, lookouts and forests, wandering aimlessly along cattle tracks and bridle paths. One particular highlight was a reservoir up in the hills where a team of Indian workers was quarrying rock right by the side of the water; we wandered past, exchanged smiles and hellos, and as we settled down for a rest in the soft pine needle beds just round the corner from the quarry, the world exploded as the dynamite the workers had been sticking into holes in the rock face went off. I guess that in India if you manage to get blown up in an explosives accident, it's just the will of God; it probably never occurred to them to *warn* us about it…

- Wandering up the road to watch a local cricket match, I managed to get a ride on the back of a push bike down to the pitch and, after the match, a ride on a motorbike to the tourist spot

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overlooking Pillar Rocks, a place I'd been meaning to visit. This sounds like a bit of good luck, but if you've ever been on the back of a screaming Indian-driven Kawasaki on a hairpin road, you'll understand just how hair-raising it is. Ashok, my courteous but reckless driver, heard my sharp intake of breath as we vulcanised our way round another corner, and shouted, 'Cold, isn't it!' He totally failed to realise that my reaction had nothing to do with temperature, but more to do with the juggernaut approaching at full speed on our side of the road. And Pillar Rocks? It's probably very pleasant when the clouds aren't smothering the view, but all I saw was grey mist and loads of trinket shops. Not exactly worth risking your life for.

- The people in the local *chai* shops were as friendly as they come. They taught us some choice words in Tamil (which I instantly forgot), invited us to join in their cricket matches, swapped cigarettes and stories, and pointed out the best places for us to visit. It was just another example of the wonderful people in India, and I realised with some delight that whereas after a month in Indonesia I was ready to throttle the locals, after a month in India I was growing to

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like the people more and more. And I still don't know exactly why, 'cos they can be an infuriating bunch quite a lot of the time…

- Green Valley View is a pleasant viewpoint that's renowned as a favourite suicide spot owing to its 2000 ft drop off; these days it seems that the only things going over the edge are empty Coke cans and chocolate wrappers, but its reputation brings in the tourists by the truckload. That still doesn't explain the sign erected by the cliff edge, which says, 'Mocking of ladies is punishable.' Still, when I visited the lookout even the group of Christian nuns who had popped in for a look were climbing over the barbed-wire wall for a better view of the scenery, so any explanation is possible. Whatever, I didn't mock anyone, just in case…

- I have discovered my favourite Indian foodstuff, bar none: Milk Bikis. These delectable treats are identical to Malted Milk biscuits back home (or 'moo cow' biscuits as we used to call them when I was a nipper) and are perfect for the midnight munchies. At Rs6.50 per packet (about 10p) they're a cheap way to make it through the day; full marks to Britannia, the company behind the

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packet, many of which Niko and I consumed in Kodai.

- The election came and went, and provided me with one of the quietest days I'd yet seen. The village was dead, and the town not much livelier; I had expected an explosive culmination of all the blustering and bloodletting, but instead everything closed down and kept to itself. It was slightly disappointing, but then again, in an election where the voting started in some constituencies on February 15th, and the results wouldn't arrive until a week into March, I suppose there's none of the 'incoming results' TV coverage so prevalent in western elections. I just assumed that things would finally go crazy when the results were released…

- In every valley there is someone with a smile that lives on beyond their presence. Pampar Puram's resident Happiness Guru was called Sega (probably not spelt that way, but that's how he said it) and he worked on the local golf course, trimming the greens. With his black bush hat, his infectious and trippy laugh and an uncanny ability to spring out on you in the middle of nowhere and drag you off for a quick *chai*, he kept us smiling

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throughout our stay. Not for nothing did the locals refer him to as the ‘hero of Pampar Puram’.

- Sarah, a nineteen-year-old bubbling brunette from Brighton, arrived halfway through my stay and improved life in the farmhouse considerably. The three of us talked, sat round campfires, walked, cooked and slipped further into the timelessness of the hills, but surely the most momentous bonding took place when we idly started to talk about music. Niko had already declared his love for English music, particularly the gloriously acidic New Model Army, and I was still having trouble shifting Sheryl Crow’s ‘Home’ from my mind, having played it incessantly as the soundtrack to my Singapore experience; so when Sarah declared she had both a New Model Army tape and Sheryl’s latest in her bag, it seemed as if heaven itself had landed in Pampar Puram. How apt is this quote from William Styron’s classic novel *Sophie’s Choice*, that I happened to be reading at the time: ‘Just the availability of music alone, she said, filled her insides with a sense of delectation, as one feels just before what one knows will be a sumptuous meal.’ We feasted on the tinny sound of memories wafting from her Walkman like hungry children in a sweet shop.

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- Our music couldn't compete with the local brew, though. Throughout the election, music had exploded through the village's public announcement system every morning at 5.30am, and this I took with good grace and a set of earplugs, assuming it was all just electioneering. But the election came and went, and the music continued unabated, kicking in before even the sun had yawned itself awake: I have no idea whether this is a common event in sleepy backwaters, but it doesn't half shatter any chance of an uninterrupted lie in.

And all we did all day was explore, taking some wonderful trips into the hilly forests, discovering waterfalls, villages and yet more happy, friendly locals. It was bloody hard to move on, but with my plans in tatters I had to move some time. So I did, eventually, heading back down to Madurai after some nine days living rough in the hills…

The Sound of Indian Politics

Written: 26 February 1998

The bus trip west into the hills containing the little town of Kodaikanal was predictably hair-raising. Grabbing onto any handhold I could find, I was thrown around the

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back seat of the bus like crockery in a marital dispute, clutching at my airborne backpack with my left foot and desperately trying to stop myself smashing into my neighbours every time the videogame-junkie driver tackled another hairpin. On the way up into the Western Ghats I noticed that above the rock-painted adverts someone had scrawled ‘Jesus never fails’; I sincerely hoped that the bus’ brakes were as reliable as the Son of God.

The first thing I noticed about Kodaikanal was the temperature. Clad in cloud and hidden from the sun, the cool air that washed around me as I stepped off the bus was as shocking as the cold dip after a sauna, and just as refreshing. I quickly fished out my sweatshirt, an item of clothing that rarely saw the light, found myself a bed in a dorm, and fell into conversation with various oddities from all over the world. The mist enveloped, the temperature dropped even further, and that night I slept the peaceful sleep of someone who has just moved from the noisy city to the silent countryside.

Peace, however, was designed to be broken, and if there is a race of tranquillity-tramplers it’s the Indians. Surely genetically hard of hearing, the Indians are one of the many Asian peoples who only buy stereos if the volume dial goes up to 11, and even in a beautiful hill station such as Kodaikanal, morning well and truly breaks under the sonic boom of India’s morning yawn.

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But the most amazing noise pollution – and diesel pollution too – came from the little trucks blaring round town, playing election propaganda to anyone within a five-mile radius of their speakers. During election time these vans are as common as mud in the towns of lowland India (and that's pretty damn common) but in Kodaikanal they were even more conspicuous because of the lack of other noise. Wandering down a pleasant country lane towards a placid lake where happy couples paddled their rowboats around like a scene from an E M Forster novel, I'd hear something different in the distant air: a cricket crowd perhaps, politely applauding a deftly cut boundary; possibly the call of a faraway bird of prey, swooping down to grab its lunch; or maybe the sound of a gardener mowing the extensive lawns of one of the ex-Raj residences dotted around. And the sound would get louder, and louder, and defying physical limits, even louder, until a battered old Ambassador would shoot into view round the corner, sporting a pair of loudspeaker horns that looked like something from an ancient gramophone, wired up to a car battery by someone who still had to learn the difference between earth, neutral and live (and probably would soon discover it the hard way). Every time I had to cover my ears as the cacophony drove past, even drowning out the sound of the van's incessant horn with its din.

The content of the din itself was quite appalling too,

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regardless of the volume. Apart from bellowing out recorded speeches from politicians (always in incomprehensible Tamil, of course) these sonic buggies would play the party's theme tunes. Now most political parties have an election tune these days – even Thatcher's crowd did – but the Hindi concoctions that echo around the hills of India are exactly the same as normal Hindi pop[25]; I mean, Billy Bragg singing politics is fine, but imagine the Conservative Party trying to grab votes by bringing in Oasis, or Labour swinging to the Pet Shop Boys. No, it wouldn't work because in Britain we treat our politics too seriously, but in India the whole business is seriously funny. Old Ronnie Reagan becoming President was incredible enough, but the number of Indian politicians who used to be film stars is unnerving: because they looked good on screen, the populace assumes they'll be good in office. Is it any wonder the country's government is so corrupt and unstable?

For example, southern Tamil Nadu's favourite candidate never appeared in any publicity without sporting his *Reservoir Dog* shades, so much so that the

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[25] Which reminds me of a story that Howard told me. The scene: Howard and a new-found Cockney travel mate are in the back of a taxi in Goa. Cockney Man says to Taxi Driver, 'Got any good tunes, mate?' Taxi Driver says, 'I have some Hindi music.' Cockney Man says, 'Yeah, cool, shove it on.' Taxi Man does so, and out screeches Hindi music at full blast. 'What the bloody hell is *this*?' screams Cockney Man. 'This isn't bleedin' indie music!' What a great export for our country…

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locals referred to him as the ‘Glass Man’. And the leader of the Congress(I) party, Sonia Gandhi, is Italian and doesn’t speak a word of Hindi: never mind, say the people, she looks great, and she’s a Gandhi, so she must be cool. This last point isn’t as facetious as it sounds, as India’s political figures have suffered heavily from the cult of personality since Independence. The first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, was followed by his daughter Indira Gandhi (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi), and after her assassination in 1984 at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards, her son Rajiv Gandhi took over. He himself was assassinated in 1989 by Tamil extremists; along with the fact that Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic back in 1948, it’s easy to make the deduction that however popular you might be in politics, if you’re called Gandhi, there’s probably a bullet with your name on it somewhere. Perhaps that’s why it took so much persuasion and so much time for Sonia to join the fray.

Travellers’ Opinions of India

Written: 25 February 1998

Here are various opinions of travelling in India, given to me by people who’ve been there.

‘It’s… well, it’s… so… err…’

‘India is like going back to basics in every aspect of

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life.’

‘Spend the whole six months there. You won’t regret a single day.’

‘India makes you think. Constantly.’

‘…hard to explain… intense I suppose… umm…’

‘Every day you see something different that blows your mind.’

‘The most infuriating, dirty, depressing place I’ve ever been. I left after two weeks and don’t ever want to go back.’

‘Every single day in India you experience every type of emotion: anger, horror, pity, joy, frustration, amazement, disgust, elation. It’s a real rollercoaster ride.’

‘…hang on… I nearly had it then…’

‘India challenges all your preconceptions of life.’

‘You’ll be dying to get on that plane out of Delhi. And two weeks later you’ll be dying to go back again.’

‘…ah sod it, you’ll just have to go yourself. It’s an enigma.’

They’re all right, in their own way. And my opinion? I loved it, utterly!

Madurai

Written: 27 February 1998

Arriving back in Madurai after rattling down the

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mountain from Kodaikanal was pleasant, and having to stay an extra night there owing to a lack of free berths on the overnight train to Kollam was far from a hardship. Where Kodai had buckets and backyards, Madurai had hot water showers; where Kodai had boring old *idly* and *dosa*, Madurai had wonderful butter chicken and nan; where Kodai had weather so cold that your washing never dried, Madurai had enough roasting heat to drive the water from my freshly dipped clothes within two hours. And the same old guest house had the same old rooms above the same old restaurant that played the same old music, creating an atmosphere that would have been like coming home, if it wasn't for the lack of Howard.

But where Kodai had a dry coolness that only the mountains can provide, Madurai slathered in the humidity of approaching summer. I hadn't noticed this on my previous visit because I hadn't yet visited anywhere cold in India (if you discount Calcutta) but after the chills of the hills, I found the steam of the plains disconcerting. It shortened my temper, and when I went for a stroll round a couple of places I hadn't managed to see on my first stopover, the touts whom I'd previously ignored with good grace and gritted teeth managed to touch a raw nerve. One particularly insistent clothes salesman started to follow me round with his promise of cheap clothes and excellent quality, so I

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turned round abruptly, palms out in front of me as if to push him away, and with my nose a few scant inches from his I said as politely as I could, ‘No thank you.’ He jumped back a mile, suppressing a stifled yelp: it got him off my case, but I couldn’t help feeling a little guilty. After all, he was no worse than the rickshaw-*wallahs* and drug pushers I’d been shrugging off nonchalantly in every other tourist city, and I felt ashamed that India had finally got to me, even if it was a short, sharp moment that soon passed.

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Kerala

Kollam to Alappuzha

Written: 28 February 1998

That night, Friday 27th, I struck out on the sleeper train from Madurai to Kollam, my first destination on the coast of the Arabian Sea (which laps against the west coast of India).

I was only going to Kollam to catch the backwater boat north to Alappuzha, a particularly pleasant water route along the inland waterways of coastal Kerala, so I hopped straight from the train onto the boat, a transition eased by the willingness of the rickshaw-*wallahs* to take me exactly where I needed to go (where they got a generous commission, of course).

The state of Kerala is a thin north-south strip along the western coast of the tip of southern India, and it's instantly got a different feel to the eastern massif of Tamil Nadu. Palm trees, a permanent fixture throughout India, have invaded Kerala in a similar fashion to Indians on a bus: there's scarcely any space left that isn't lightly shaded by a canopy of fronds and nuts. There's a pleasant sea breeze in most places with a consequent comparative lack of humidity, and with the mountains of the Western Ghats cutting Kerala off from

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the rest of southern India, the culture is markedly different to its neighbouring states: it's no coincidence that just down the coast from Kollam are the most popular beaches in India after Goa.

The backwater boat takes advantage of the natural and man-made waterways that follow the coast from north to south, inland from the sea. Smothered on either side by palms and rural houses, the route of the eight-hour trip is quite beautiful, if you manage to ignore the tourists. Yes, the backwater trip is a severe tourist trap, and although it's easy to shut out the inanity of the local's reactions, the boat I boarded had a particularly intriguing mixture of western weirdoes. There was the English geek with his NHS specs, stupid curly haircut and a talent for insipid small talk; the two Birmingham lasses who concentrated on showing off as much bare flash as possible; the man who plugged himself into his Walkman and stayed connected and thus disconnected until we arrived… as per usual the tourists were as much of an attraction as the beauty of the surroundings.

Except that the tourists were instantly forgettable, and the scenery was the stuff of which memories are made. My long-enforced boycott of the delights of water transport (barring the Indonesian cockroach ferries) had made me forget just how pleasant coasting can be, and with absolutely no swell, a cloudless sky and a total lack of idiotic crew, it all added up to a distinctly pleasurable

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day. There's an idyllic detachment that comes from having nothing to do and no control over your destination, forcing you to kick back and simply savour the experience, so I settled into my sunny seat on deck and thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Still, Indian peace is, as I had already discussed, an oxymoron. Passing through the villages where the canal is lined with concrete paths, children run along the banks, easily keeping up with the boat, shouting out, 'Have you one pen? Give me please one pen! One pen, one pen!' and other such variations on the theme. Of course, nobody gives them a pen to start with, and their persistence – following the boat for five or ten minutes, screaming out their litany that by the end has become 'wunpenpleezwunpengimmewunpen!' – is either a product of fanaticism or sheer boredom; but eventually the pens start to get thrown, competition is fierce, and the annoyance of the shouting is only fuelled by touristy compliance. There are smiles everywhere, but I couldn't help the feeling that this was a slightly false sense of socialising: the children were all grins and so were most of the adults, but plenty of men on the banks of the river looked quite fed up with our presence. And out of maybe a hundred kids, only one said thank you when he got his pen. Bless him.

Despite the obvious Indian-ness of the people, one thing that startled me was how similar the Keralan

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backwaters were to French Polynesia and some parts of Indonesia, such as Flores and equatorial Sulawesi.

On reflection, there can't be too many variations available in the recipe when the ingredients are water, blue sky, palm trees, fishing, copra farming and squat huts, but it was uncanny how much I was reminded of distant atolls and remote fishing villages. For one slightly scary split second I even felt a twinge of homesickness for those unusual days spent floating through the bowels of the Pacific, but perhaps it was simply relief at not being there, disguised as nostalgia.

Another aspect of Kerala that smacked of Polynesia was the incredible turnout of the women, despite the primitiveness of the habitat. I've commented before on the pristine quality of the fairer sex in India as compared to the clean but mediocre male species, but when your home is on a tiny breakwater between a waterlogged paddy field and a weed-choked canal, the vibrancy of the eye-catching sarees is even more commendable. Nothing, it seems, can dull the liveliness of the local beauties, except utterly abject poverty.

The boat trip ended in a picture-perfect sunset over the sleepy town of Alappuzha, where I boarded a bus north for Ernakulam, one half of the twin town of Kochi-Ernakulam. I managed to get myself a seat in the melee by the time-honoured method of passing my daypack through the window for someone to place in a

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vacant space, but the Brummie girls obviously hadn't manage to slip into the Indian psyche quite as convincingly, because their laden entry into the heaving bus was accompanied by the most pathetic display of whingeing and squealing I have ever heard.

Their argument with the conductor, who quite reasonably insisted they take their packs up to the front of the bus, embarrassed me in the way that only unwanted geographical kinship can: heads turned and wobbled in incredulity as Midlands voices raised to fever pitch in an expression of frustration and futility that could only have resulted from a bad day in the heat.

When we arrived in Ernakulam I made a break for freedom by jumping into the first available rickshaw and heading off for a hotel, but the ubiquity of the *Lonely Planet* meant that not only did the noisome couple book into the same hotel as me five minutes later, I also bumped into them at a nearby restaurant, where I was treated to the therapeutic retelling of the gory details of their ordeal. Is it any wonder some people find India a struggle, when simply boarding a bus becomes a disaster area?

Kochi

Written: 2 March 1998

Kerala is a real melting pot, and the coastal city of

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Kochi is a perfect example of the cultural mishmash of India's southwestern corner. On the way to Kochi I had spotted plenty of Christian churches and political flags smothered in hammers and sickles (Kerala was the first state in the world to freely elect a communist government and still has communist rulers), and in Kochi things were even more blatant; 20 per cent of Kerala is Christian, but you could be forgiven for thinking it's a much higher proportion.

From statues of Jesus holding out his hands in supplication to signs declaring that March 5th was 'Stalin Remembrance Day', Kochi felt different from the rest of India in more ways than one. Even the locals seemed more friendly and relaxed than usual, and as I took the ferry from Kochi's twin town Ernakulam across the bay to Kochi itself, I fell into conversation with a middle-aged man from Bangalore who was visiting with his girlfriend. He gleefully told me all about the three-week holiday he was on, and as the boat plied its way across the harbour mouth, the conversation flowed freely.

'We took a lovely trip up into the hills yesterday, about 100km on the bus,' he said.

'Oh yes?' I said. 'How was it?'

'Wonderful. We walked up into the top of the hills there, and the most amazing thing was the plants. 5 ft high, they were, all growing wild in front of our very

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eyes.’

‘Plants? Err… yeah, right, sounds great.’

‘Yes, and they just chop the leaves off as they need and leave the rest to grow naturally.’

‘Leaves? Umm…’

‘It was great. We bought five tolas of oil for a great price.’

And then it clicked. A tola is 11.6 grams, and it’s the weight system used for selling hashish, marijuana, *bhang* or whatever else the locals need to maintain the red-eyed look of wonderment. My new-found friend kept talking, oblivious to the turn our conversation had taken, and proceeded to try to persuade me that I should buy one of his tolas at the knockdown price of 400 rupees, ‘a lot less than I’ll get when I go to Goa and sell it to the tourists there,’ he said.

But I was on the ferry to catch the sights of Kochi, a difficult prospect through the haze of hash oil, so I thanked him for his kind offer and slipped into the crowds on the ferry terminal, quite happy just to get high on my surroundings.

The Backstreets of Kochi

Kochi has a wonderfully eclectic collection of Portuguese churches, backstreets with a Jewish overtone and a beach with the strangest fishing tackle you’ve ever seen, and it’s a superb place to wander round on a lazy

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Sunday afternoon. The imposing St Francis' Church is the oldest western church in India, the original building dating from 1503 (by contrast, St Mary's in Chennai is the oldest British church, dating from 1678); here, on a Sunday, I watched a cricket match played out under the palm-tree shade, with cricket whites, a manual scoreboard and locals playing their own games of catch round the boundary, oblivious to the action on the pitch. Meanwhile on the bay the fishermen were operating their Chinese fishing nets, strange wooden constructions consisting of huge nets, attached to one end of a long pole that can be raised and lowered by judicious use of counter-weights and levers. The actual catch they got was pretty poor, probably due to the large numbers of container ships docking in Kochi's busy docks, but the contraptions themselves are quite an attraction, whatever the results.

And down the road from the ferry terminal is Jewtown – yes, it's actually called that – which was originally set up in 52 AD at the time of St Thomas the Apostle's voyage to India. By all accounts the Portuguese, who arrived here some 500 years ago and a few hundred years after Jewtown had been founded, were quite surprised to find quite a Christian presence already here; they weren't so impressed, however, with the locals' total ignorance of the existence of the Pope. Jewtown, now reduced to an old synagogue and a few

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little backstreets crammed with craft shops and spice traders, is a picturesque and slightly unusual area, and although the number of Jews has reduced drastically, it still retains the feel of a suburb apart from the rest of Kochi.

It's also home to Mattancherry Palace, a decrepit old building that contains some of the best Hindu mural paintings I have seen, depicting scenes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Top of the list is a cheeky little scene of Krishna, everyone's favourite wide-boy, fondling a number of blissfully happy milk maids with his two feet and six hands, at the same time playing the flute and getting quite a few rub-a-dub-dubs himself in return. Good old Hinduism: Christianity and Islam could learn a few things about being happy from the Hindu legends.

The Promenade

Returning to my hotel on the ferry after a truly worthwhile wander, I grabbed some supper and set out to explore Ernakulam, the main city of the twosome, and home to all the hotels, large shops and insane rickshaw drivers. And to my amazement I discovered something that would be more at home in a coastal town in England than in India: Ernakulam has a promenade.

Ignore, if you will, the piles of discarded packaging drifting into mounds round the tree trunks, and the

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familiar smell of half-decomposed sewage wafting off the humid bay, and you have what is, by definition at least, a promenade. The clientele aren't quite the Edwardian couple with parasol and pram, but what the strollers lack in aesthetics they more than make up with their numbers. Backing this aromatic concrete pathway are huge posters of Christ[26] and large tower blocks whose lobotomised architects obviously thought that the Stalin era had the art of building down to a tee; but surely the most astounding fixture on this seaside extravaganza is the bridge.

Bathed in the saffron suffusion of sodium lights, the Ernakulam walkway bridge is like something out of *The Jetsons*, and is just as out of date. Made from finest concrete, except for the steel hawsers artistically supporting the structure's roof, it's a favourite spot for the locals to hang around looking cool, shooting the shit and breathing the heady fumes of the local sewers. Perhaps the popularity of the bridge has something to do with the four ice cream kiosks sitting on either side of the small canal the bridge traverses, themselves

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[26] Christ, however, gave me the spooks in Southern India. Perhaps it's too much exposure to images like the Turin Shroud, but the pictures of Jesus smothered over Kerala made me think of graveyards at night and that incredibly disturbing glazed look on yer man's face as he bleeds to death on the cross: normally pictures of the Son of God are faintly comforting, even if I don't avidly worship his dad, but in Kerala I found myself much preferring Krishna fondling the milk maids than the bearded distress of the crucifixion.

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protected from the outside world by piles of discarded ice cream tubs, but whatever the magnetism of the thing, walking across it is like running the gauntlet.

Coming from the comparative darkness of the promenade, where homely couples take their little children for a stroll to sample the fresh sea breeze, the sodium shockwave of the bridge is like turning the corner into a boy racer's Escort with all its extra headlights on high beam. Smarting from the glare, I wandered across the centre of the space-age monstrosity, only realising when halfway across that everyone lining the bridge's railings was staring right at me. Pausing only to make sure that I hadn't accidentally left on my springy ping-pong-ball antennae again, I met a few gazes head on, smiling my teeth off in a show of bravado matched only by the terminally stoned or the incredibly rich; of course, following the rules of Indian engagement to the letter, those who caught my beaming gaze smiled back with genuine glee. This is the Indian reaction to westerners: they're delighted to be singled out of the crowd and smiled at, and a little embarrassed to have been caught ogling you in the first place. This is why I grin at absolutely everyone in India: they love it so, and the response is an instantaneously heart-warming grin that makes ecstasy look like aspirin. You've *got* to love the locals.

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James Bond in India

Written: 1 March 1998

A happy coincidence saw me bump into Sarah in the Indian Coffee House on the morning of March 1st, along with her travelling partner Lisa, with whom she had met up again after a short split. I was doubly pleased because I wasn't that sure Kochi deserved another day of exploring, and a day loafing around with the two Brightonians was a darn sight more interesting than photographing yet another colonial church.

The plan for the next day centred on the new James Bond film. *Tomorrow Never Dies*, the second James Bond with Pierce Brosnan at the helm, was a mediocre flick with jokes bordering on the smuttiness of a *Carry On* film[27], but the most incredible thing wasn't so much the film as the way it was shown. I'd thought I'd be immersing myself into a dreamland of vodka martinis and action-packed scenes from the wildest reaches of chauvinistic swashbuckling, and instead I ended up with

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[27] For example, Bond is screwing his attractive Danish teacher when Moneypenny rings him up on his mobile; when he eventually finds the bloody thing and answers it, he says he's 'brushing up on a little Danish', and Moneypenny tells his to pull it out pronto and save the world again with the words 'you always were a cunning linguist, James.' It's an old joke and, if you ask me, a little contrived. On the other hand, a bit of *Carry On* humour is fine; I especially remember that crack in *Carry On Columbus*, the unsuccessful recent *Carry On* film that includes a cast of modern comics, where Julian Clary is describing the sleeping arrangements in the hold of Columbus' boat. 'You sleep here,' he says, looking at the young cabin boy, 'but you can come up my end any time.' Nice one: even Sid James wasn't that blatant.

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an experience of James Bond that was not exactly what Ian Fleming intended.

The cinema in India is an interactive event: people don't sit silently through a film, they jeer and clap and yell and scream. And so with James Bond the clichés elicit a raucous response from the crowd: when Q turns up with his latest gizmos, they go wild; when the stunt at the start of the film ends up in a near-death explosion of mayhem, destruction and a skin-of-the-teeth escape by Bond, they leap about in a frenzy; and when he saves the world from certain catastrophe, they're practically spasmodic with ecstatic relief. But where the action scenes earn high praise, the one-liners totally pass them by, and more than once the only people laughing at the dialogue were the three English tourists.

But surely the main appeal of James Bond is that there's something for nearly everyone, and in the case of India it's easy to pinpoint the chief attraction of 007: it's the wonderful vehicles he drives. When Q unveiled his spanking new state-of-the-art BMW-cum-weapon-of-mass-destruction, the testosterone-fuelled members of the audience cheered with beery boyishness, and when Bond stole a bike as a prelude to a rooftop chase *par excellence* through the chaos of Saigon – yet again on a BMW, a surprising find in backstreet Vietnam wouldn't you say? – you could hear them salivating on the back row (and yes, it was simple salivating rather than the

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more traditional back row sport: this is innocent India, remember). If westerners admire 007 for his suave and sophisticated manner, his beautiful women and his snappy dialogue, the Indians admire him for his hardware and his ability to blow up everything in sight. When westerners think of Bond, they think of beautiful curves and how attractive they are in little black dresses; when the Indians think of Bond, they think of beautiful curves and how aerodynamic they are.

However, halfway through the film, just as the action was kicking in, the lights came up and there it was: an *intermission*. I don't think I've ever witnessed a break in the middle of a film, and although during a three-hour Hindi epic I would think a breath of fresh air is a biological necessity (not to mention a psychological one), it rather spoils the flow of a Bond movie. And not only did everyone rush out of the theatre for a quick snack, *pan* or whatever, but those remaining were thrilled to see a trailer for the film *Titanic*, during which they cheered and clapped when Leonardo DiCaprio came on screen as if he was the tenth incarnation of Vishnu. If I'd had dreams of escapism, I was being rudely pulled back into reality, and the film wasn't even done.

Despite the loud discussion halfway through the second reel a couple of rows behind us (when everyone joined in, forgetting for a moment that they'd come to

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the cinema to watch a film rather than discuss the price of fish), the film managed to reach its explosive climax without a hitch. But a final surprise awaited me: as soon as the baddies got blown up, the crowd got up and started to leave, before the film had even finished. The traditional end to a James Bond film, where Bond is settling in with his latest lover and steadfastly ignores the concerned radio cackle of HQ, is irrelevant in India: I never caught the witty retort in *Tomorrow Never Dies* because there was such mayhem as the crowd milled out that all the dialogue was inaudible; and as soon as the credits hit the screen, the projectionist killed the film dead. Talk about being shocked back into reality.

And what a reality! I swear that as we stood on the pavement blinking into the traffic, I felt as if I was back in the film, with rickshaws doing insane stunts round me, chasing invisible spies through the dangerous streets of urban India. And then I realised that India is always like that. Here, 007 would just be another mad driver in a mad country, except he'd be driving a pouting BMW.

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Karnataka

Mysore

Written: 4 March 1998

I really wanted to like Mysore, but I didn't, not because there was anything wrong with Mysore, but because I was completely shattered by the bus journey from Kochi. One thing that doesn't get more pleasant with experience is the nightmare overnight journey, and the bus I picked for the ten-hour trip to Mysore was old, crappy and noisy, and had to bounce along some of the most pothole-ridden excuses for highways that I've ever seen. I was to find out later that in India, Valium is almost irresponsibly cheap and can normally be bought over the counter from any chemist with a sympathetic ear, but ignorant of this handy tip, I unfortunately managed to stay awake for every minute of the juddering journey.

Despite the miserable attitude that the lack of sleep forced on me, Mysore's attractions were pleasant, with its huge palace, a grand hill temple and the wonderfully colourful market. The Mysore Palace, a monstrosity of pomposity and the seat of the maharajas of Mysore – who still exist and, in a similar fashion to upper class inhabitants of English stately homes, still live there,

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albeit in a little building off the back – was quite a sight, even if I did get stung twice for *baksheesh* by the palace guards who insisted on pumping me with uninteresting information about the building and then demanding money in return.

I also got accosted by a man from Kerala who had whisky on his breath and a serious desire to get me to write to him from home; I found him extremely hard to shake him off, despite my protestations that my favourite pastime was uninterrupted peace and quiet. Eventually the only way I could get rid of him without causing offence was to promise to write to him once I got back home, which of course I did; you should never promise to write to someone unless you actually mean it. I got my personal space back, and he got his letter (though he never replied; too much whisky, perhaps).

I then took a bus up Chamundi Hill to the hill temple for a view over Mysore that wasn't particularly special, so I quickly glided down the 1000 steps to the bottom of the hill and went exploring the fruit 'n' veg market at Devaraja. Here, at last, was the character I'd heard of from other visitors to Mysore: wonderfully friendly people, amazingly vibrant piles of *tika* powder in all the colours of the rainbow, mounds of incense sticks and fragrant oils, heaps of vegetables of unknown origin and use, and everywhere people busily selling, buying, haggling and living life to the full. It was worth

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visiting Mysore for the market alone; it almost perked me up enough to enjoy myself.

But I still found myself suffering from a downer after the bus journey, and the hotel I'd picked in my sleepy state wasn't exactly conducive to a good night's rest, so after just one day I found myself boarding the bus to Bangalore in search of, well, something else. In a country as big as India, there's an easy solution to frustration; you just keep going.

Poor Mysore, it just caught me at a bad time, but at least I learned my lesson. Don't try to explore somewhere new when you can hardly keep your eyes open, or you'll have to rely on the photographs to remind you where you've been, and what's the point of that?

Bangalore

Written: 7 March 1998

Bangalore is the yuppie capital of India: certainly its streets are cleaner and its teeth brighter than any other Indian city. But despite the veneer of western capitalism, Bangalore remains a typically Indian place, proof perhaps that however hard the Cult of America tries, it will never conquer the second largest population mass in the world.

Yes, there are supermarkets, but their shelves are

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tiny and the goods overpriced. There are signs everywhere proclaiming, ‘We prefer Visa,’ but this turns out to be a blatant lie: find me *anyone* who wouldn’t rather have cold, hard cash. There are comparatively few cows blundering through the streets: I only saw a handful, though they were particularly fine specimens. There are rubbish bins, but they still overflow with rubbish, attract flies and stink like a sumo wrestler’s jockstrap. And the people are as miserable as city dwellers anywhere in the world: smiling at them produces a total blank, and apart from a handful of happy-go-lucky locals, Bangalorians obviously suffer from too much money and not enough happiness.

Other similarities between Bangalore and western cities are quite apparent, but as in everything, the spectre of Indian insanity looms large. For example, Bangalore sports little red and green men at pedestrian crossings, but in true Indian style nobody takes a blind bit of notice of them, and they’re useless anyway: one set I saw gave you precisely four seconds of green time before reverting to red, not even enough for Linford Christie to get across. Coupled with this are the traffic police, who stand at traffic-light-controlled junctions, directing traffic by whistle; it’s as if the official line is to ignore the lights, which is exactly what happens. To be honest, crossing the road when the red light should be stopping the traffic is probably more dangerous than crossing

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when it’s green, because when it’s red the rickshaws are concentrating more on not hitting the traffic crossing their path than avoiding something petty like pedestrians.

Bangalore still has beggars – a particularly insistent type, too – but instead of living in lean-to tents on the high street, they sit outside shops selling genuine Ray Bans and designer clothes. Not all, though, are as street-wise; I saw my first case of elephantiasis in Bangalore, the disease that makes your limbs swell up so much that your legs look like an elephant’s: it was quite a sight, and my heart went out to the poor bastard.

Perhaps more surprisingly, Bangalorian rickshaw drivers use their meters, a first for India: everywhere else they steadfastly refuse to use them because they can always make more money out of a dumb tourist by quoting a crazy price and haggling it down a little, but in Bangalore it’s illegal not to use the meter, and unbelievably the drivers tend to obey. The only problem with the meter is that instead of getting worried about being ripped off for a trip that may or may not be a long way, you end up getting paranoid about whether the driver is going round and round in circles, just to up the fare. My first rickshaw driver didn’t help things: I wanted to go to a place called the Airlines Hotel on Madras Bank Road, and he started heading for the airport on Old Madras Road. No, I didn’t pay the extra

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Rs50 he'd managed to clock up by totally screwing up and giving me an unwanted tour of the suburbs…

In the Buff

But surely the biggest shock that awaited me in Bangalore was the availability of beef, or to be more precise, 'buff'. Yes, the cow might be sacred, but the buffalo isn't, and perhaps a reason for the near lack of them in the city is that they're available in burgers, pizzas, steaks and stews; it's not that common, but there are restaurants serving buff, and I found myself drawn inexorably towards the smell of burnt bovine like a rat to the lilt of the Pied Piper. I never realised how much I missed the taste of beef until I'd tucked into a meal of buff soup and buff pizza at one of the best Euro-Indian restaurants I've seen. Along with this luxury, beer is freely available and is drinkable in pleasant surroundings as opposed to the prisons of Tamil Nadu, and you can find such western icons as Wimpy and KFC dotted around (but no McDonald's, yet). And possibly as a result of this surfeit of gluttony, I noticed that a sizable proportion of middle-aged women were quite fat, a disappointment after the sleek beauty of the rural areas; the younger generation, however, were decked out in hip-hugging 501s and curve-enhancing mini T-shirts, with hardly a saree to be seen. It was an intriguing sight, wandering past a huge queue full of

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young couples all waiting to see the sexy BMW in *Tomorrow Never Dies*. (And in fairness, the young men of Bangalore looked smart in a way that I didn't believe Indian men could, with their designer tops and smart pressed trousers; the odd *lungi* made an appearance, but for the most part the male Bangalorians looked as well turned out as the national cricket team.)

I decided to take advantage of the cosmopolitanism of Bangalore by developing ten rolls of film and mailing them home. Even Kodak makes no sense here, though; on the receipt I received for my deposited films was a disclaimer, which said, 'Because days used in colour photographic materials, like other days, may change in time, neither prints nor copies will be replaced or otherwise warranted against any change in colour.' Read it again. Now tell me what it means, in English.

I also managed to track down some more excellent music – Sheryl Crow's latest and Radiohead's *OK Computer* – and as I wandered down the road towards my shabby little hotel room to try them out, I stopped dead in my tracks. Surely that couldn't be the smell of *kretek* wafting down the street… but there it was, Gudang Garam for sale at the kiosk! If anything, this sums up Bangalore: to become truly stylish, you need American jeans, a German car, a British accent and Indonesian smokes. You'll still be an Indian, though.

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The Sights of Bangalore

The sights of Bangalore aren't that numerous, but the ones that are worth a visit are pretty impressive. Government buildings dominate the wide, tree-lined boulevards, with the bright red monstrosity of the High Court and the modern and highly stylish Vidhana Soudha, home to the Secretariat and State Legislature. Above the entrance to the latter is the inscription 'Government work is God's work', which might help to clarify quite why government work involves so much bureaucracy and paperwork; the civil service is truly the home to the Holy Triplicate.

In the south of the city is a botanic garden, probably one of the best in India, and although it's a truism that no Indian botanic garden can hope to match the standard of western gardens (in this climate you'd need to invest a hell of a lot just to keep the grass from drying up), Lalbagh Garden was pretty impressive. The lakes glimmered, the trees cast their shade over the dusty lawns, countless Indians lay prostrate and motionless on the ground, and the copious litter skittered down the paths in the afternoon breeze; it was pleasant, despite the people casually throwing Pepsi cans into the undergrowth despite the nearby litter bins, and although it didn't buoy my spirits like Kings Park in Perth or the gardens in Singapore, I felt at least that the work of the 18th century botanists who laid it out in the days before

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the British wasn't entirely wasted.

And on my way back to the shops and shysters of the main shopping area, I came across a delightful little sign on the pavement. 'Urinating, spitting and littering in public places will attract administrative charges,' it said, and I couldn't resist kneeling down to copy these priceless words down. It was only than that I noticed the smell: I must have been standing in a puddle of at least four hours of God's work.

The Post Office

Written: 7 March 1998

There are a couple of services that even Bangalore's yuppiedom couldn't render any more ludicrous: government tours and the post office.

I'd decided I wanted to try out one of these crazy break-neck Indian tours, and where better than the temple towns of Belur, Halebid and Sravanabelagola, three classic architectural sites that are apparently worth visiting, but which take quite some time by public transport? I say 'apparently' because I never got to see them.

I'd originally tried to book a tour from Mysore, but a lack of interest had meant that the companies couldn't guarantee the tours would go, and indeed every company I tried eventually cancelled their 'daily' tours

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due to a lack of numbers. ‘Never mind,’ I thought, ‘I’ll try in Bangalore where there are more tourists,’ and sure enough the state tourist department said they had a tour, it was going every day and yes, it would definitely leave. This, by the way, is a use of the word ‘definitely’ that doesn’t appear in the Oxford English Dictionary.

So I turned up at the state tourism offices at 7am on Friday 6th, only to discover that I was the only person actually booked on the tour, and that it was therefore cancelled, quite within the bounds of the small print which I had read and assumed didn’t apply, seeing as I’d been told the tour would definitely be going. But there was absolutely no point in getting pissed off, so I took my refund and walked back to my hotel; it amused me later to note that my refund was too much by Rs100, a little bit of divine justice if ever I’d seen it.

I wasn’t that bothered, to be honest, because I’d just had ten rolls of film back from the local developing studio, most of which seemed to be pictures of temples. Sure, when I got back home they looked a lot more interesting, but after cataloguing and captioning nearly 400 photos of which a sizable number were of yet more Dravidian *gopurams*, I felt quite templed-out. Thank goodness the tour had fallen through, or I’d have been wading through yet more temple towns…

But I was still left with ten sets of photographs to send back home, normally a pretty easy job: shove them

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in a jiffy bag, nip down the post office and send them off. If only it was that easy: in India there's no such thing as a jiffy bag, and using a normal envelope is just asking for trouble, so it's back to basics again. The solution is to nip down to the local tailor, who will stitch up your precious memories in cheap linen, a solution almost on a par with the good old jiffy; this you can then take to the post office for mailing.

Which can take forever. There's Book Post Surface Mail, Book Post Air Mail, Registered Sea Mail, Registered Air Mail, Ordinary Surface Mail, Ordinary Air Mail and a different counter for parcels and letters (the difference between which isn't clear), as well as a separate counter for stamps and a separate information counter for discovering which counter you need. I wanted to send a parcel (which turned out to be dealt with by the letter people), post a letter (for which I needed stamps from the stamp man before handing it in at the letter counter) and buy some aerogrammes (from yet another counter), so by the time I'd finalised my business with the philatelic equivalent of the civil service I was pretty damn confused. But at least it was cheap and, eventually, my films made it home, so I couldn't really complain.

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Reflections on India

Written: 5 March 1998

Some random reflections on life in India, penned while sweating through the heat wave in Bangalore.

- The smarter you look in India, the more attention you attract from the touts and beggars. I went out into the streets of the city in my smart trousers and clean shirt, and I couldn't believe the difference: by wearing standard western issue and being white, I was basically advertising the fact that I was rich beyond all Indian dreams, and that I should be liberated of this financial burden at all costs. Compared to the reaction when I slouch round in baggy cottons and a salt-marked three-day-old T-shirt, I was amazed, until I saw how many white tourists there were in Bangalore, all gagging to be fleeced, saying things like, 'Well, it's only three pounds in real money, you know, that's awfully cheap.' Dullards.

- Being the clever dick with the budget has its dark side, though. I've often mentioned the beggars, but never my personal relationship with them, and it's time to come clean. Until now I've always totally ignored the pleading children, the fingerless diseased, the sagging crones and the

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skateboard cripples, because I told myself that it's better to give your money to a charitable organisation like Mother Theresa than into the hands of a beggar, just in case that beggar isn't so poor, or is working for someone else. There is, however, one big flaw in this argument: I've never given a bloody penny to any of these charities I pay lip service to, and it struck me all of a sudden that I'm simply a rich western bastard who counts his rupees on a daily basis and never gives anything away. Haggling with the salesmen over what is essentially a pittance is one thing – if I end up paying ten times the real price, then so will the next tourist, and that's not good – but not giving a few rupees to someone who is dying in front of my eyes is simply unforgivable, and in Bangalore I suffered a complete turnaround: if I have change, then so does the beggar, if he or she doesn't look too well off already.

Of course, it can be argued – quite truthfully, I might add – that this recently discovered philanthropy is nothing more than an attempt to ease my conscience, and indeed has its roots in pure selfishness, the desire to stop feeling guilty about my previous misanthropy. This is also true, but those of us who can seriously say that they

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give to charity with totally pure intentions are either lying or have no dark side, and I don't believe such a human exists.

- On the subject of money, I realised the other day that my money belt – a cotton contraption that snuggles under my trousers nicely, hiding my valuables in an area guarded by instinctive intrusion paranoia – is now a part of me and I feel undressed without it. Think of this: my belt routinely contains in cash over one year's salary for the average Indian (about £200) plus a lot more than that in travellers cheques. Perhaps this is what they mean by a capitalist waistline…

- Jarvis Cocker once wrote a song called 'Dogs are Everywhere'. I don't think he was specifically thinking of India at the time, but he could well have been: I have never seen (or heard) such a pack of miscreant scoundrels as the dogs in India, and if it wasn't for the part they play in cleaning up the crap off the streets I'd say this place had a serious problem. I can hardly believe that in England, a stray dogs are rounded up and put down: here every dog is stray, and the concept of a pet dog is as laughable as a pet swan would be in England. Chalk up the dogs as another species

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that will survive the nuclear holocaust, along with the cockroaches.

- I woke up this morning with what can only be described as a smoker's cough: hacking on the congestion in my lungs, I brought up all the shit I'd inhaled and finally made it into the ranks of the exclusive wake-up-and-expectorate club. It wouldn't bother me, but I don't really smoke (apart from the odd packet just to sample the local brands of cigarette, none of which I particularly liked); it's just pollution getting to me, and the head cold that has been my constant travelling companion has finally matured into full-blown Indian congestion. Roll on the clear air of the Himalayas.

- Bangalore railway station is as clean and modern as any in the West. Computer screens show the departures and arrivals, TVs show MTV on the platforms, shops selling Pepsi and coffee line the sides, and the tracks are free of cows and excess litter. And above the heads of the busy commuters hangs a sign saying, 'To know how good your career is going to be, consult an astrologer.' (And this just over from the sign that mysteriously advises, 'Do not entrain or detrain a moving

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train.') It's a top spot for weirdness.

- I am gathering a hefty collection of Indian addresses from people who have been interesting enough to merit a decent conversation (drunken Keralans excepted). I have one regret, though, and it is this. Back at Surabaya train station in Java I met a very sociable young man who was in the Indonesian air force, and after talking to him on the platform for a while, he wanted to swap addresses: I took his, and I gave him a false one, because at that ill-starred time I couldn't think of anything worse than having to put up with pidgin-English letters from afar. Then on the train I sat next to a young Muslim girl who plucked up all her courage and linguistic skills to string together a conversation with me; she also asked to swap addresses, and I told her that as I had been travelling for so long I no longer had an address (an excuse I use to this day, because I don't really want to give out my address to all and sundry) but she gave me hers anyway, entreating me to write to her, as she collected foreign stamps. She was, as I recall, from Solo.

  In a fit of general malaise with the whole Indonesian thing, I screwed up both addresses and

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binned them. For this I feel guilty: a postcard is a tiny effort for me, but for someone in financially stricken Indonesia it would be a real treat. And as if to rub it in, I read that the first major piece of violence sparked off by the Indonesian disaster happened in Solo. It's one of my few regrets…

- I'm slowly becoming Indian, in some ways at least. Part of it is through necessity, part through resignation, but I now find myself spitting in the street, pissing in public, chucking rubbish onto the roadside, eating with my hands and crossing traffic with reckless abandon. In justification, I spit because India's pollution has made it a necessity to cough up the unpleasant, and as spitting is preferable to swallowing, I simply join the herd in a socially accepted gesture; I piss in public because, again, it is the norm, and there simply aren't any public toilets in India; I chuck rubbish only onto existing piles of rubbish, but I'd rather use a bin, if only there were such things (the piles act like impromptu bins anyway); I eat with my hands because there isn't any cutlery, it's kind of fun, it's the normal way to eat your food, and I always wash them first; and I cross the traffic with a new sixth sense I have gradually been developing since Indonesia, because it's not

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only the best way to navigate your way through a city, it's rather entertaining at the same time, in a videogame kind of way.

However, all of these habits will disappear within two seconds of my arrival back in the West, where they have clean air, public toilets, rubbish bins, cutlery and pedestrian crossings. And there are some Indian habits I'll never pick up, like drinking your coffee from a saucer or wobbling your head in an ambiguous way (although, if I want to get my own back on an Indian, I wobble my head when he asks me a question, 'Which country you coming from?' Wobble. Ha!). Deep down, I guess I'm an ingrained westerner.

Kama Sutra

Written: 7 March 1998

To kill a few hours before the departure of my train to Hampi on the evening of Saturday 7th, I decided to go and see an Indian movie. The one I picked, *Kama Sutra*, rather fortuitously turned out to be in English, and not only was it comprehensible, it was a serious film.

Kama Sutra, as the title rather subtly implies, is a love story. Being Indian cinema, the emphasis is on story rather than love, though there was quite a bit of

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kissing and nudity, something you wouldn't find in a mainstream Hindi movie – but I found myself transfixed. Produced in association with the British company Channel Four films it oozed atmosphere and cinematographic appeal, even if the story failed to follow up on the more intriguing of the sub-plots, and instead stuck rather unimaginatively to the main story, a standard 'Love Hurts' tragedy set in 16th-century India.

But ignore the plot: the costumes, sets and attention to detail were so good at portraying ancient India that I felt I recognised the place. And perched pleasantly on top of this vivid imagery was one of the most beautiful actresses I'd ever seen in a film, an Indian called Indira Vandra. I wasn't the only one who found her alluring either, as about 90 per cent of the audience was male, sitting there masticating on their *pan* while thinking of something far more assonant. The male actors were pretty damn perfect too, but of course I didn't notice that.

So despite my digs at Bollywood, *Kama Sutra* showed that India could produce westernised films, albeit in cahoots with western production companies. And the soundtrack was stunning, regardless of the complete lack of any song-and-dance routines; instrumental, Indian and perfect for the film, it's the sort of Indian music I've liked since stumbling on Ravi Shankar back in my days as a hippy.

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It was quite a relief after all the sing-along insanity of normal Indian film culture…

Hampi

Written: 16 March 1998

A night-train ride northwest of Bangalore, Hampi seems to exist in a sphere of its own, a self-contained combination of timeless natural wonder and historical human impact. Here the ruins of ancient civilisations pepper the rocky landscape while restaurants pander to the requirements of the tourist classes, and all the time the slow turbulence of the Tungabhadra River meanders along the valley floor, only months away from the raging tumescence of the monsoon.

Describing the atmosphere of Hampi is as difficult a task as describing the allure of the city lights or the hypnotic attraction of dance music, but there is no doubt in every visitor's mind that Hampi has a special *something*, even if putting your finger on that something is impossible. For some it is the stark beauty of the igneous rock formations that dominate the landscape as it shivers under the heat haze of the midday sun; for others it is the different sense of time, a disconnection from the hustle and bustle of modern India – indeed, the modern world – as cows ramble past the stone steps leading down to the water where colourfully dressed

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women beat the dirt out of their washing; for others it's Hampi's proximity to the beach state of Goa, resulting in the availability of luxuries like king-size cigarette papers and wonderful tourist trinkets while managing to remain an outpost of primitive culture.

Because the little town of Hampi is surrounded by one of the most extensive and varied collections of ruined buildings this side of Delphi, I decided to employ the services of a guide, a young man called Chandra who turned out to be a particularly good find. Over two half-day tours he managed to transform a collection of dilapidated stone constructions into a living, breathing world of bazaars, incense, rituals, royalty, engineering genius and warring nations, a feat achieved by combining his encyclopaedic knowledge of local history with an evocative delivery, a talent unusual in someone so young. As a one-on-one guide he brought Hampi alive, recreating the scenes from 500 years ago when the Europeans were tentatively reaching out their colonial intentions towards the east, the Muslims were methodically invading India from the north, and the Vijayanagara Kingdom was thriving in the Hampi area. I normally scorn guides, but this time it turned out to be a good move.

On the other hand, touring Hampi through the incredibly sweltering afternoon sun did make me think that if I saw another temple, I'd kick it. After a while

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lingams and *gopurams* begin to look exactly like all the other *lingams* and *gopurams* you've ever seen, and so it was with the temples of Hampi. However, this is where Hampi wins hands-down over other sites, because behind each ruined building is scenery that bewilders.

In a geological pattern echoed by the rock sculptures of central Australia, Hampi's landscape is volcanic in origin; as the volcanic exudate cooled it cracked along vaguely orthogonal lines which, when exposed to the vagaries of weathering, wore down into piles of rounded boulders the size of houses. The result is mountains of rocks stacked up in gravity-defying balancing acts, with boulders seemingly about to roll down onto the town while stone slabs look as if a slight push will slice them off like bread off a loaf, taking with them banana trees, coconut palms and electric cables.

Electric cables, indeed: for Hampi, while an historical *tour de force*, is an attraction that's positively ripe for the milking. The number of visitors who flock to see the sights is on the increase, and simply looking at my two-year-old guidebook's description of accommodation and restaurants showed how much had already changed.

But for once the onset of the clumsy boot-heels of tourism didn't concern me greatly: to destroy the unique atmosphere of Hampi you would have to defile a stunningly large area of inhospitable Martian landscape,

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and more buildings won't manage that. And Hampi is hardly the place where the clubs of Goa or the high-rises of the hill stations would work: the people just don't seem to have drunk from the cup of mammon that the Goans have drained. This is, without a doubt, a godsend.

Images of Hampi

As with all fairly long stays, I slipped into the lifestyle. In Hampi the mañana ethos is stronger than in most places, and yet again I found my plans slipping away into well-deserved oblivion.

Highlights of my lounging in Hampi follow, in no particular order, follow…

- Have you ever heard a musical temple? Neither had I before Chandra took me to the World Heritage Vitthala Temple. Here, tapping certain stone pillars produces harmonics that can only be described as ethereal, and it's something that's quite impossible to imaging until you hear a tune being tapped out on a stone carving of a drum.

  Discovering this sort of architectural genius really makes you really think about modern life; modern man could probably build such a temple out of granite if he so desired, but it could only be achieved with the aid of computers and science,

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systems that the builders of Hampi couldn't have dreamed of even in their most hallucinogenic phases.

The same goes for the Pyramids, Stonehenge, the megaliths of Easter Island and the Bada Valley, the palaces of the Aztecs and so on. Do you ever get the feeling that by learning so much, we forget even more?

- Other astounding architectural wonders pointed out to me by the vivacious Chandra were a comprehensive aqueduct system for filling the city's water tanks and bathing pools, underground temples used for secret meetings (and where bats inhabit the dank water-lined corridors while shafts of sunlight slice through the gloom), ancient water-based air-conditioning on the first floor of the queen's pad and a refractive light trick that reflected a *gopuram*'s image upside down on the wall inside the temple. I could describe the fascinating history of the area and all the quirky clashes of Jainism, Hinduism and Islam that are reflected in the architecture, but plenty of better-informed scholars have written on that topic. In the case of Hampi, it's best just to go there and see for yourself.

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- The local tribeswomen have resurrected their traditional dress in a wonderful combination of aesthetic concern and wily tourist appeal. These women, normally fairly ancient, get around in costumes that look as if they've smothered themselves in glue and rolled around the floor of a pantomime seamstress' sewing room. Chunks of mirrors offset the garish pinks and purples, monstrous nose studs clash with whole families of arm bands, and all the time they're trying to persuade you to shell out for a handbag that would have made early Pink Floyd fans suck in their breath at the savage colour schemes. If *Blue Peter* was into fashion, this would be the result, and it's a gloriously kitsch sight.

- Also quite aware of the deep pockets of tourists, crazy *sadhus* roam the streets with their wild eyes and wilder claims, and herds of wonderful postcard-selling children ply the restaurants with their excellent English and smiles that keep on shining well beyond their departure. If these little sprogs indicate the next generation of Indians, this country's got a rosy future.

- Why is it that just as soon as you have met some of the most warm-hearted and interesting people

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on your whole trip, they have to disappear into the folds of the travellers' trail, always too soon? In Hampi I met and waved goodbye to a whole group of great people who instantly struck a chord. Kenny, Ross, Kirsten, Mark, Leslie, Mark and Sharon… and don't forget the locals, a collection of coyly intelligent bundles of fun who turned the whole event into one long festival of singalongs, culinary experiments and familial closeness. Maical, Lakshmi, Ali and countless others didn't just enliven Hampi, they personified it. And, as if I need to mention it, people smiled back in Hampi. Not for the last time I found myself hoping that I'd meet them all again, some sunny day.

- I finished reading *Sophie's Choice* and, almost a first time for me, I actually felt tears welling at the cataclysmic outcome of the novel. Perhaps it was the fact that I identified heavily with the narrator, but it moved me; the only other book I remember affecting me like this was a series I read as a child, some five or six books whose names I forget but whose contents I vaguely remember, when, after completing the last book and reading of the death of a character who had permeated each of the stories, I first felt the icy grip of a

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master storyteller killing a character who had become almost real. *Sophie's Choice* came along at a time when I was really beginning to rediscover my passion for all things literary, and if anything it has solidified my hopes to become a writer. If only I could produce the matchless prose of William Styron, I would feel I had achieved my life's ambition…

- Belated but not diminished by its tardiness, another bout of vomiting and diarrhoea struck me down on Thursday 12th, surprising me after a month and a half of reasonable health. I lay knocked out in my room, writhing in a turmoil of half-remembered dreams, sweat-wrung sheets and subterranean homesick blues, hoping for nothing more than a visit from somebody. Unfortunately I twisted in solitude, feeling far more than just lonely: I felt forgotten. However, it turned out that there was no reason to feel lonely, at least as far as illness went. During my eight-day stay absolutely everyone in the group went down with something, whether serious or just mildly uncomfortable, but there's definitely a hygiene problem in Hampi, especially at this time of year when water is scarce. (And as in Puri my illness coincided with enforced vegetarianism, because

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Hampi is a no-meat zone on account of its religious significance: bring on the chicken, I say.)

- The sunsets in Hampi are indescribably beautiful. So I won't even try.

- Try crossing a river in a coracle and you'll never again be scared by amusement park rides. Over the river from Hampi are more restaurants and hotels (where they serve alcohol, a temptation but not a practicality with my illness-provoked antibiotic regime), which you reach by entrusting your life to a wood and tar contraption that redefines the word 'basic'. At night these coracles are beached by the riverside, overturned to create a collection of giant turtle shapes that create circles of fertile grass in almost crop-circle-accurate patterns. On the other hand, entrusting your life to Charon isn't as crazy as floating down the river in an inflatable rubber tube, a popular way of seeing the landscape. I would have gone, but I found watching the tourists float past from my vantage point in the riverside restaurants far more relaxing than the prospect of getting wet myself. Besides, I kept thinking that I could always do that tomorrow…

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- It seems Hampi has every type of Indian weirdness available, all crammed into one small town. There's an ashram being built on the hills overlooking the eastern end of the bazaar; there's a crazy palmist down by the river with orange robes, a huge beard and a little hut, who can be seen wandering around the town with his portable radio on full blast; there's a local homeopathic doctor who will cure all your ills for Rs50, asking questions like 'What qualities do you most admire in your friends?' instead of 'Now, where exactly does it hurt?'; there are restaurants serving *bhang lassi*[28] by the river, and extremely strong ones too, judging by the local populace; and there are dogs, pigs, cows and chickens wandering around everywhere, eating each other's faeces and generally having a ball. Sounds just like everywhere else I've been, doesn't it?

The Holi Festival

Written: 14 March 1998

As a therapy, regression often proves effective. From the simple weekend routine of playing knock-about football with your mates, to the more psychologically

[28] That's a marijuana milkshake, the closest thing I've ever found to Anthony Burgess' 'moloko with knives' from *A Clockwork Orange*.

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dubious exploits of businessmen who dress up in nappies and suck their thumbs in oversize cots while paying a mistress a small fortune to act as their mum, reverting back to childhood is a glorious release from the potentially numbing effect of faking an adult outlook every day. Not surprisingly the Indians are fully aware of the positive energies associated with regression, but typically they manage to make it feel less Freudian and far, far more fun; and to cap it all, they've set aside one day a year that's wholly dedicated to slipping back into childhood, or that's how it appears from the outside. There is a religious significance, but then Christmas is a religious holiday too… apparently.

Holi is an annual holiday celebrated on the full moon in March, purportedly to say goodbye to winter and hello to warmer weather[29]. However, as with most festivals, the reason has all but been sidelined in favour of the festivities themselves; thus the bonfire lit the night before Holi in the main street of Hampi, a symbol of the destruction of the evil demon Holika, wasn't so much a spiritual affair as a chance to for the locals to slap on the western dance music and leap around the streets, annoying the policemen and singularly failing to

[29] This is why Holi is mainly a northern festival, because in the south the last thing people want is for the pleasant temperatures of winter to turn into the humid tandoori oven of summer. Hampi is a delightful exception, possibly due to the tourist influx; the day we celebrated the coming of hotter weather, it was already scorching enough to make the balls on a brass monkey dangerous to touch.

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light the fire until most of us had drifted off to sleep. But the bonfire is only one bit of Holi: the best is saved for the day after the full moon.

Holi is all about colour, namely colour in the hair, colour on the face, colour on your clothes, colour all over the streets and colour just about anywhere else it'll stick. The colour itself takes the form of *tika* powder, either thrown *au naturel* or added to water and squeezed from a plastic bottle; it pays to wear grotty clothes on Holi (so I simply chose randomly from my collection of sun-bleached and laundry-battered garments) because if you play with *tika* powder, everyone's a winner bar the clothes.

The mayhem went on all morning. Fuelled by copious amounts of *bhang*, the locals danced around to the beat of tin drums, smothering themselves and any unwary passers-by in a psychedelic dream coat of purples, blues, yellows, reds and greens, managing to attract a sizable collection of manic westerners on the way who joined in with characteristic energy. Five minutes after joining the throng it didn't matter whether you were white or black, because everyone was purple; a couple of hours later and clean people were not only a rarity, they were targets; the streets ran purple, buildings dripped with missed shots, cars looked as if they'd been hit by multicoloured bird shit and tentatively the women of Hampi, who had sensibly hidden themselves away for

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the madness, came out of the woodwork, vainly trying to recognise friends and family through the layers of pigment.

And before long, half the population of Hampi was down at the *ghats*, scrubbing and soaping in vain as they realised that not only does *tika* powder stain like buggery, it doesn't react to traditional ablution methods. Soap slid off skin, leaving pink splatter marks plainly visible; shampoo might have added Vitamin B5 to the follicles, but it didn't shift the streaks; in fact the only thing that even pretended to work was rubbing with sand, physically removing layers of coloured skin, leaving everyone with a familiar red glow and sore shoulders. It seems that one of the side-effects of baptism by Holi water is a healthy glow, if you count purple, yellow, red, green and blue as healthy, which, judging by the smiles, everyone here does.

But nobody cares, and indeed it's kind of entertaining to be slightly stained for the week after Holi: everyone knows what you've been up to, and grins maniacally as you wander past with your pink face and green hair. It took 1977 and the Sex Pistols to bring colourful anarchy to England, and then it came with an extended middle digit; the Hindus have known about it for centuries, and it's a darn sight more fun when it involves staining your friends.

And you don't have to wear safety pins through the

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nose.

Bijapur

Written: 18 March 1998

Waving goodbye to my Hampi friends as they boarded the bus for the southbound train, I felt a strange yet familiar feeling. Yes, it was sad to be seeing newly discovered kin disappear into the evening sun, but I suddenly felt that little thrill associated with being alone again, with being independent and having to make my own decisions.

Those decisions included leaving Hampi the next day, Monday 16th March, and jumping on the train to Bijapur, a major town to the north. It struck me on arrival that Bijapur felt quite a lot like Hyderabad, and a glance at the map showed that the distance between the two wasn't that great; indeed, Bijapur has a large Muslim population just like Hyderabad, which probably explains it.

Bijapur's great attractions are architectural, specifically Islamic architecture. Minarets, domes and echoing burial chambers all conjure up images of the *Arabian Nights*, with crescent moons rising in clear starry skies while camel trains stand silhouetted on the desert horizon, and even the wailing of the *muezzin* stirs me in a strange way, even if it's just in frustration at

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being woken up at 4am yet again; whatever the western image of Islam, its atmospheric grace never ceases to amaze me.

The Golcumbaz

The Golcumbaz, for example, is astounding. A huge domed building, looking slightly ungainly but definitely impressive, the Golcumbaz's appeal lies not so much in its impressive size and structure, but in the aural effect of its dome. The dome contains a whispering gallery, and it's a stunner.

Climb up to the balcony inside the dome, clap, and the sound gets echoed back to you ten times in an explosion of noise that borders on the spooky. Make a raspberry sound and listen to a choir of flatulence; blow a whistle and marvel at sounds that even Roger Whittaker couldn't reproduce; sneeze and the whole world sneezes with you. But listen in silence and the true power of the Golcumbaz becomes apparent.

That is, it becomes apparent if you can manage to find silence in which to listen; after all this is India, where silence in public places is a rarity given the sheer number of people in the country. But against all the odds I managed to coincide my visit to the Golcumbaz with the only time of the day when the usual hordes of Indian tourists were in transit between sights, and I had the whispering gallery to myself for a good five minutes. It

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was during this time that I discovered the secret of the dome.

Dotted around the perimeter of the gallery are eight little doorways to the roof, each shaped in the traditional archway design of Islam, and through these doors waft the sounds of the city. Through one doorway the lilt of the market-*wallahs* selling their goods echoes tenfold on the roof; through another the rickshaw horns argue with each other in triple triplicate; yet another amplifies the warbling of the Muslim call to prayer; and over there one door catches a flock of birds as they chatter on the outside parapet, oblivious to the eavesdropper inside. The Golcumbaz is the Islamic equivalent of the mixing studio – or, to be more theistic, the Islamic equivalent of an all-seeing, all-hearing god – and for five minutes I was privileged enough to be in a studio free of Hindi pop artistes.

Of course this didn't last, and just as I was getting to the end of my personal repertoire of funny noises, a troupe of Indians appeared through one of the doors and proceeded to scream, clap, screech and expectorate[30] in a cacophony of sound that would have woken the ancient Islamic king buried in the cellar if he hadn't already given up trying to rest in peace. I retreated to the

[30] Despite the poetic nonsense of the sign downstairs proclaiming that 'Spitting and writting [sic] is strictly prohibited'. Another great sign in a country that excels in this lost art.

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comparative peace of the city streets before my eardrums suffered permanent damage.

The Incomparable Ibrahim Roza

Other beautiful buildings followed, such as the simple yet striking Jama-e-Masjid Mosque; the Asar Mahal, where kids played cricket in the nearby water tank, and I was accosted by a crazy old man who kept shouting, ‘Cumoncumon!’ as he dragged me up to the roof and insisted I take pictures of him prancing around before demanding some *baksheesh*; and the Citadel which sported some beautiful ruins and pleasant parks.

But little prepared me for the sheer beauty of the Ibrahim Roza. Scorched by sunlight and surrounded by parched parks, the minarets and domes of the twin burial tombs of this astoundingly beautiful building summarise everything that is aesthetically emotive about Islamic architecture.

Perfect domes are topped with crescent moons, surrounded on four corners by symmetrical minarets that manage to combine structural simplicity with intricate stonework; doorways with the distinctive pointed arch lead into cool high-ceilinged chambers, sheltering the tombs from the outside world and cutting off almost all trace of the bustle of the world outside; covered walkways around the perimeters of the buildings provide a contemplative environment for a relaxing read

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or (if you really want to be a local) a quick snooze, and all the time there's a background vibration of history, long marches, religious wars, scimitars, sultans and Persian love stories.

Even the small group of locals who invaded my peace did it in a respectable and almost welcome way, saying, 'Excuse me sir, sorry to disturb you,' before launching into a surprisingly elegant and worthwhile conversation. The concepts of Islam and modern India seem to be at loggerheads, the former being strict and regulated and the latter being strictly unregulated, but there are more Muslims in India than in most purely Muslim countries, including all the Arab states; it also seemed to me that Indian cities with large Muslim areas were generally more respectable and less chaotic than their Hindu counterparts. Many people would say that this is a shame, and would point to the busy insanity of India as one of its main attractions, but I beg to differ; the contrast of Islamic India with the Hindu mainstream is like a breath of fresh air that makes you appreciate both religions. Furthermore, I just love Islamic architecture, their evocative histories, and their (comparatively) reticent politeness. I sometimes wonder if westerners have more in common with the Muslim Indians than Hindu Indians; this might seem a strange thing to say, given the traditional gulf between the West and Islam, but when you see the different religions in

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action, it makes you think.

Holi in Bijapur

On the other hand, there were three areas where the austere nature of Islam seemed to crumble in Bijapur. First, some places celebrate Holi not only on the full moon, but also on a few specific days afterwards, and sometimes every day of the following week. 17th March was evidently one of those days in Bijapur, and I saw plenty of people wandering around smothered in purple and silver (the favourite colours of the Bijapurians, obviously) and even managed to gain a few facial and arm stains myself, much to the glee of the local populace. One assumes that only the Hindus actually participate in the Holi celebration, but the proliferation of brightly coloured people and the ubiquitous smell of alcohol clashed vibrantly with the traditional view of an Islamic town.

Second, Bijapur was full of pigs, more so than any other Indian city I've visited. Muslims don't eat pigs, but in a strange display of opposites attracting, Bijapur snorted and rummaged around in the dirt with the best of them.

But surely the biggest clash between cultures is when a foreigner like myself visits a peaceful Muslim tomb and ends up doing the Temple Tango. This dance, a common sight when white people explore temples in

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India, is a simple consequence of having to take off your shoes at the entrance to every temple, leaving you to enter on bare feet. This is fine in theory, but when the summer sun has been baking the stone slabs all day, it's a bit much to bear when your feet aren't hardened up like the local soles, and you end up hopping around from shadow to shadow, muttering ows and ouches in increasingly loud volume as the heat builds up on the balls of your feet. Of course, you have to leave your shoes outside Hindu temples as well as Muslim ones, but in a Hindu temple the Temple Tango isn't quite so noticeable among the busily fascinating activities that seem to take place all the time. In a Muslim tomb, though, it feels rather out of place; I just hope my hopping round the Ibrahim Roza didn't look as disrespectful as it felt.

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Maharashtra

Aurangabad

Written: 20 March 1998

Wednesday 18th March was a long bus-transit day north from Bijapur to Aurangabad. For absolutely no reason Aurangabad almost totally failed to light my candle, and despite my booking in for three nights, I hastily departed after two, having explored the local sights (such as the wonderful caves at Ellora, which *did* light my candle).

This early departure was almost entirely down to the place in which I stayed. Aurangabad is home to a genuine Youth Hostel, and with its fairly convenient location and extremely cheap charges (Rs20 per night, or about 30p) I went for it. I will never again stay in a Youth Hostel unless I have no choice: they all have the same grim atmosphere, and although it's hard to put my finger on the exact reason for this depressing hostel vibe, it's been present in every one I've stayed in, from Australia to India.

Perhaps it was the institutional feel of the whole set-up that set my teeth on edge: lights out was at 10pm, the manager was not a 'manager' but a 'warden', there was plenty of sickly sweet Christian messaging posted on the walls and the buildings looked like they had been

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auctioned off from the set of *Carry On Doctor*. But the real reason for my total failure to enjoy Aurangabad Youth Hostel was the type of person it attracted. Calling them ‘strange’ would be a kindness.

To be fair, my experience of Youth Hostels hasn’t exactly been good anywhere. My one memory of the hostel in Perth was of one particularly depressed traveller spending a Saturday night lying in a pool of delirium having taken an overdose of Prozac; the paramedics were most courteous as they carted him off, gibbering quietly to himself.

Youth hostels are home to one particular type of weirdo: the hostel networker. He is normally (but not always) young, is pretty shy, has travelled extensively but never outside the international network of hostels, and normally has some kind of oddity about him, whether it’s a habit of staring blankly ahead, a mild case of obsessive-compulsive disorder, or just a lack of social normality. There are a few girls too, but they have nothing going for them except a future career teaching Physics for the Open University.

There will also be a smattering of Japanese, a few serious Germans, a couple of headcases with tattoos and strangely cropped facial hair, and at least one resident weirdo who has been there longer than anyone can remember and who *still* doesn’t quite fit in.

I booked in for three nights, but only managed to

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handle two. It was like leaving school at the end of term when I finally lugged my pack out of the door and hailed a rickshaw: I even felt like playing conkers with the driver, but either he didn't know how to play or he misunderstood me. Instead he just covered his groin with his hands and shuffled me into his cab.

I couldn't get in quick enough…

Ellora

Written: 19 March 1998

The main attractions near Aurangabad are the cave temple complexes of Ellora and Ajanta, and for them it's worth putting up with any amount of social asphyxiation. I spent Thursday 19th at Ellora, and it was simply magnificent.

Television and industrialisation must be the most destructive forces known to man, because before either of these (excellent) developments came along, man actually achieved things. The caves at Ellora are prime examples of what man can do if he doesn't get hooked on soap operas and machinery, and instead is desperate for something else to alleviate the boring nature of his existence. Faith might move mountains, but you've got to have a hell of a lot more than faith if you're going to dig temples out of rock faces.

Or should I say *into* rock faces. The temples of

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Ellora are as big and as impressive as any others you will see in India, but here they're literally made out of single, complete pieces of stone: before, there was a hill of rock, and after all the whittling and chipping there stood (and still stands) a complex multi-storey temple, smothered in intricate carvings, towers, statues and plenty of cool rooms for meditative reflection.

There are three main areas of temples at Ellora: the collection of Buddhist temples, constructed around 600 to 800 AD; the Hindu temples, built between 600 and 900 AD; and the Jain temples, built somewhere between 800 and 1000 AD. The styles of the 34 caves are wonderfully diverse, from the austere and peaceful meditative atmosphere of the Buddhist temples, to the overwhelming grandeur and pomposity of the Hindu offerings, to the halfway house of the Jain constructions, which manage to combine aspects of both of the previous areas into a unique religion.

Hard to describe, the main temple in the complex – the Kailbash Temple – is a masterpiece. Built by digging down vertically into a mountainside and forming the whole temple complex from the top down, it is estimated that simply quarrying the three million cubic feet of rock (about 200,000 tonnes) must have taken at least 100 years; the complex covers twice the area of the Parthenon and is 1.5 times as high, all made out of a mountain. It is, not surprisingly, a breathtaking

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sight.

Daultabad

Written: 19 March 1998

Ellora is impressive, and so is another sight around Aurangabad, the mighty Daultabad Fort. Always a sucker for a good fort, I stopped off at Daultabad on the way back from Ellora to the social quagmire of my Youth Hostel, and I wasn't disappointed. Soaring from the desert plains is a mountain that forms the perfect natural defence, with sheer cliff walls petering out into a hilly crown that's an excellent setting for a fortress. But even though the fort is a wonderful sight and provides great views of the surrounding desert hills, it's the story behind Daultabad that gives it an atmosphere all of its own.

The original fortress in Daultabad was constructed in the 12th century AD by the Hindu rulers of the Deccan, but in 1308 it fell into the hands of the Muslims. It must have caught the eye of the conquerors because Mohammed Tughlaq, the Sultan of Delhi, decided to move his capital from Delhi to Daultabad. In a display of madness that even modern India has trouble matching, he marched his entire population the 1100km south to his new city, even the old and unwell, not surprisingly resulting in the deaths of thousands of his

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subjects on the way. Undeterred by this unfortunate experience, he obviously realised that the blistering heat of the desert wasn't quite his cup of tea after all, because 17 years later he marched them all the way back to Delhi, again causing a severe knock to the population levels. What a fruitcake!

The fort, however, is far from unstable, and has stood the test of time remarkably well. The ruins sit atop a huge hill, surveying the land for miles around, and even with the proliferation of nattering tourists it retains its atmosphere of ancient and turbulent times, combining ancient Hindu and Islamic architecture into one gorgeous sight.

It all made Aurangabad almost bearable.

Ajanta

Written: 21 March 1998

I made a beeline north from Aurangabad as soon as I could, and stepped from the world of 1950s Christian values into what can only be described as the Twilight Zone. A three-hour journey north saw Ian and I booking into a hotel in the little town of Fardapur, a speck on the landscape that had all the atmosphere of a motorway service station.

Fardapur's claim to fame is its proximity to the cave temples of Ajanta, but as with Aurangabad, something

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wasn't right. Menus in restaurants were produced claiming to sell almost anything you might desire, but all they could actually manage was fried rice and soft drinks; the northbound bus out of town left at either 8am, 8.15am or 8.30am depending on who you asked, and the journey time was either four hours, eight hours, ten hours or 12 hours, depending on the phases of the moon (for the record, the bus left at 8.45am and the journey lasted 12.5 hours); and as we sat in our room, strange Indians would walk past our window, staring in and mumbling weird sounds that would be more at home in a David Attenborough documentary.

Add in the birds nesting in our bathroom and flying in and out of the windows to collect food, the fan that changed its speed more often than an Indian bus driver, and the fact that we kept getting told the hotel was full when we tried to pay for another night and it quite blatantly wasn't, and I think you can safely say that Fardapur could be wiped out by a freak earthquake and nobody would even notice. If oblivion needs to be personified, you couldn't do better than Fardapur; where else can you see signs like the following in our hotel lobby?

ROOM CHARGE Rs150
EXTRA PARSON Rs50

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Even an extra Man of God couldn't bring sense to the desperate situation in crumbling Fardapur…

Still, the Ajanta caves were worth a visit, even if they weren't as spectacular as those at Ellora; Ajanta's main appeal is the collection of paintings inside the caves (which are all Buddhist, predating the Ellora caves, having been built between 250 BC and 650 AD). Although the paintings are faded they are quite spectacular, and the cool shade offered by the caves creates a beautiful and atmospheric viewing chamber.

The caves are in a pretty little setting on a bend in a river (which was, unfortunately, almost totally dried up), and we spent a couple of very pleasant hours wandering around randomly, avoiding the touts and soaking up the heat, desperately trying to put off the return to Fardapur for as long as possible.

Cricket and India

Written: 22 March 1998

Everywhere you look in India, someone is playing cricket: look out of bus windows, along dusty streets, in tiny villages and big cities, and you'll see a bunch of youngsters playing the game with rudimentary bats and branches for stumps. It's in the blood in much the same way that football is in South America and ice hockey is

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in Canada[31], and wandering past locals as they bowled polished stones at baobab-stick stumps, it struck me that cricket is such an obsession in India because it's no more than a sporting personification of the whole country.

For a start, cricket has surely the most warped set of rules, regulations and bureaucracy of any sport. Trying to explain the rules of cricket to someone who's never watched the sport is harder than trying to explain the unspoken rules of the English class system to a Belgian; indeed, the vast majority of non-English European travellers have no idea of the basic concepts behind the game, and even after ten minutes trying to grasp the fundamentals, they're often no closer to the truth. Add in a scoring system that's full of more statistics than a political manifesto and you have a statistical nightmare of proportions that can only be described as governmental.

Then there's the nature of the game itself. Turn up halfway through a match and ask, 'Who's winning?' and there's no answer: even the most experienced cricketer can't tell you with any amount of certainty. This is

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[31] Ken, a very friendly American whom I met in Mandu, told me about a conversation he'd once had with an Indian boy. The young sports fan was telling him how excellent India and Pakistan were at hockey: they were, in fact, world leaders, he was keen to point out. Ken, however, couldn't get this into his head. 'Where on earth do you find the ice?' he asked, and for the first time in India, said Ken, he witnessed a confused silence.

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astoundingly Indian: no questions have definite answers here, it's always 'It's possible' and 'Maybe', and even then the actual answer can suddenly change, just like in cricket. In cricket you have to wait until the last ball has been bowled to be sure of the result, and more often than not there's no result at all. You can have a draw even when one team has scored considerably more than the other, an apparent contradiction. It's not that other sports don't have draws; it's just that a draw in soccer is a definite equality, whereas in cricket it's a result of not finishing the game properly.

Then there are two equally placed umpires, so they can get embroiled in an argument as to who is right, who's the most senior umpire and so on and so forth (though thank goodness *baksheesh* isn't represented in cricket – the thought of a batsman being clean bowled and then wandering up to the umpire, slipping him ten rupees, and miraculously staying in is too much to contemplate). And on the subject of authority figures, the whole uniform thing – pressed whites and collared shirts – hits an Indian nerve: everywhere you go in India there are policemen in their smart army uniforms, bus conductors wearing khaki, *sadhus* in their saffron robes, waiters in the Indian Coffee Houses sprouting hats that look like delicately folded napkins, and so on. In India, uniforms are a status symbol.

Then cricket is a team game, representing the

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theoretical solidarity of a united India; but when it comes down to bowler versus batsman it's an individual sport, which is a bit closer to the truth of an India made up of a conglomeration of states who keep mumbling about their independence while setting off bombs to make their point.

But I suppose the real reason that Indians like cricket is that it's possible to spend days, literally, watching one game, and for a nation that spends days, literally, sitting around in *chai* shops shooting the shit, cricket is perfect. As far as lazy sunny day sports go, cricket reflects the Indian vibe more than anything else, and that's why you see it everywhere, from the country to the cities. Psychologically, life in India must sometimes feel like a test match.

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Madhya Pradesh

Mandu

Written: 25 March 1998

After two days of long bus journeys north from Ajanta and through dusty landscapes and the transit city of Indore, I finally arrived in Mandu. I had been getting itchy feet while exploring the hot, dusty, flat plains of central India and was beginning to dream of lofty hill stations nestling at the feet of snow-capped Himalayas, but Mandu reminded me once and for all why the arid desert areas of India are in a world of their own. Mandu is a huge fortress built by the Muslims, a combination of two of the things that make travelling worthwhile: glorious landscapes and fantastic architecture. And when I say fantastic, I really mean it: Mandu is spectacular.

I simply fell in love with Mandu. It's impossible to describe in words the sheer beauty of cupola-topped pavilions outlined against the pure blue sky, or the peace of domed tombs breaking the savage dryness of dusty red scrubland; even photographs only manage to capture a part of the appeal, as the context of Mandu – perched on top of a windswept cliff in the middle of the Deccan Plains – is a vital part of the ambience of the place.

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Mandu is a huge, crumbling collection of old buildings from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, sitting on top of a huge flat mountain, surrounded on all sides by steep sloping sides and rugged hairpin roads. It is steeped in atmosphere and history.

With lakes, citadels, stunning views over the plains below and a friendly local population who mysteriously insisted on greeting me with 'Bye-bye' instead of 'Hello', I wandered for hours in the blistering heat, sheltering in cool tombs, under the arches of deteriorating mosques and in the shade of the baobabs, bottle-shaped trees[32] with painfully twisted and leafless branches that looked completely parched (and probably were). Despite the stiflingly hot breeze from the plains, I thrived.

Of course, there were some distinctly Indian occurrences that in the West would have marred an otherwise perfect place, but here they were all part of the experience. For example, one of the more intriguing spots in Mandu is called Echo Point, so named because its position next to a steep hill creates an echo when you clap; I was unable to experience this sonic novelty, however, because right by the clapping point was a café blaring out the loudest Hindi pop music that Mandu's

[32] The baobab trees looked exactly like the boab trees of northern Australia, and given the similarity in name, they're probably the same tree. But don't quote me – I'm no botanist.

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erratic electricity supply could churn out, somewhat spoiling the effect.

And at Rapamuti's Pavilion, a building whose simple design and amazing views summarise everything that is good about rock fortresses, I was accosted by four young Hindu dudes who insisted on taking photographs of me hugging them, for some strange reason; they also asked if they could borrow my Australian bush hat (although it was made from rudely slaughtered cow) and proceeded to pose with it for the camera, each in his turn and each with his own distinctive pose. I had to suppress a smile as each thrust his groin out, hooked his thumbs into his jeans and managed an impersonation of the seventies that made John Travolta look chic.

But these small wrinkles in the fabric didn't even touch the tranquillity of Mandu. I had to tear myself away when it was time to leave for Bhopal. Mandu was up there with Bijapur's Ibrahim Rosa, and that's really saying something.

Sanchi

Written: 26 March 1998

Sanchi is a hill topped with some spectacular Buddhist ruins, 'among the best in India' according to my guidebook (which says more about the other Buddhist ruins in India than I cared to know). Certainly the ruins

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are Buddhist, and they're interesting, but after Hindu temples reaching into the sky and Mughal fortresses dominating windswept outposts of the empire, *stupas* aren't exactly thrilling. Dome shaped and topped with strange spires that look like something out of *Flash Gordon*, *stupas* just sit there: you can't go inside them, you can't climb them, and although they look pleasant, so does crazy paving, and I wouldn't cross a continent to look at a patio.

The area is peaceful – which is why the Emperor Ashoka chose it in the third century BC as a site for his Buddhist *stupas* – and is certainly a wonderful place to visit, but as for the architecture (World Heritage stuff, no less) it's not that special. This was a pity, but perhaps unintentionally reflected a change in my attitude towards Buddhism, something I'd been pretty fond of back in the bush of Oz, where I'd lapped up books on the stuff and even did a bit of meditation.

The problem is that Buddhism is based around the precept that life is a piece of shit, and where that idea was particularly appealing at a time of my life when I was leaving home because I wasn't happy with things as they were, it doesn't hold much water nowadays. I keep thinking of that famous Chinese painting called 'The Three Masters', where each of the inventors of the three main eastern religions – Confucius (Confucianism), Gautama Buddha (Buddhism) and Lao-Tse (Taoism) –

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has dipped his finger in a vat of vinegar and stuck it in his mouth.

Confucius, who believes that life should be governed by rules, regulations and a reverence of ancestors, has a sour expression, as if to say that this taste is disgusting and that something should be done about it; Buddha has a bitter expression on his face, a reflection that he believes life to be an endless cycle of suffering, escapable only by attaining enlightenment through meditation and a purity of spirit, and that the vinegary taste is just a confirmation of this attitude; and finally Lao-Tse is smiling, because he reckons life is a pretty good thing, and everything in life has its purpose, its beauty and its relevance.

From this I tend to think that Taoism is the best sounding of the lot, but I have yet to do any hardcore research, and I'm not really in the mood for religious discourses at the moment; at present I'm reading the *Ramayana*, the mythical story of Rama, and it's as good a read as the stories of ancient Greece or the wonderful tales of King Arthur. Then I've got the *Arabian Nights*, a perfect accompaniment to the buildings I've been exploring, followed by *Lamb's Tales of Shakespeare*, a children's book that contains fifteen of Shakey's plays, retold in shortened form for children, a bloody good way of learning the plots without wading through the real thing. India, being the second largest publisher of

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English books after America and the UK, has some wonderful options, and all at a knockdown price, of course.

Vaguely related to this, I've developed a new sitting posture. I used to kneel whenever I sat on the ground, perhaps a reflection of my Christian upbringing; when I started growing my hair and reading about meditation and Buddhas, I started to sit cross-legged; and now that I'm in India I sit like the Indians, after weeks of frustrating practice.

The Indians squat down by the usual method of bending the knees and squatting down until your bum is on top of your heels, but they go a little bit further and manage the same position with the soles of their feet totally flat on the floor.

Try it: I bet you end up with your heels off the floor, with all the weight on the front ball of your feet. Well after lots of practice on, of all things, the good old squat toilet, I can now sit with my feet flat on the floor, my bottom off the ground, and with pretty perfect balance. It's surprisingly comfortable, and you'll see Indians everywhere squatting down for hours, looking at ease in a position that looks decidedly painful. So now you know…

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Bhopal

Written: 27 March 1998

Wednesday 25th March was one of those days that make you want to throw in the towel and bury your head under the pillow. I was trying to get from Mandu to Indore in time to catch the train to Bhopal, where I could buy a ticket to Gorakhpur, just south of Nepal, but almost everything that could go wrong went wrong.

Skipping the details, the bus from Mandu to Indore arrived two hours late, missing the train to Bhopal by ten minutes and necessitating the use of another bumpy bus to Bhopal instead. This bus arrived only one hour late, giving me scarce minutes to rush to the reservation office at the train station, where I was lucky enough to be the last person able to book a ticket before the 'Closed' sign went up. I then went looking for a hotel, and after trying eight places that were full or had no single rooms, I eventually found a place on the ninth try, a place perhaps best summed up by my receipt, which was made out to 'Mr Froiengner'. I collapsed, exhausted but happy to have achieved at least *something* in the form of my train ticket.

My relief was short-lived, though, as it turned out my ticket wasn't a reservation, but simply an indication that I had been placed on the waiting list, in 23rd position to be precise. Unfortunately the 'Closed' sign prevented me doing anything about it – such as trying a

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different train, different route, different class or whatever – so even my session at the station had been a waste of time. Never mind: at times like these, when some people light Hamlet cigars and some people drink too much, I have a solution.

Back in the outback my solution was to find the nearest mountain and climb it, but in India I have neither the necessary personal transport nor, in the central plains, any convenient mountains. However, there is one wonderful thing I can do to cheer myself up, and it could only work in India: it's to treat myself to a slap up meal with all the trimmings. The meal I had was huge, tasty, accompanied by a big, freezing bottle of beer, and rounded off with a pleasantly priced bill of just £2. That's right: £2 will buy you a monster meal, and as I normally spend about £1 on my evening splurge, doubling the budget really is a treat. Good old India.

The next day I did manage to upgrade my ticket to air-conditioned class – and thereby getting a berth – but the price was five times higher, going from Rs210 to Rs1001, or from just over £3 up to a comparatively whopping £16 for the 864km, 19.5 hour journey. It's easily the most expensive trip I've done in Asia, but when you consider that a 1000km bus journey in Australia cost me over £50, for which I only got a reclining bus seat, it's still ludicrously good value for money. Getting from A to B is always the most

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expensive part of going from C to D via the rest of the alphabet, but public transport in the developing world is so cheap (because otherwise the public couldn't afford it) that for a fat, rich westerner like me, life just gets ridiculously cheap. It's great.

Union Carbide

Anyway, back to Bhopal. After spending the morning visiting nearby Sanchi, some more wonderful food, and the discovery of a branch of the Indian Coffee House, a wonderful chain that does simply divine *masala dosa* for brekkie as well as the best coffee I've had in India, I spent Friday 27th killing time waiting for the train and exploring Bhopal. Before arriving in Bhopal I'd thought the name sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it until I read about it in my guidebook: it's a tragic story.

Back on the sultry winter's evening of December 3rd, 1984, the Union Carbide factory in Bhopal gave the residents an early Christmas present of 15 tonnes of methyl isocyanate. This instantly deadly gas, used in the manufacture of pesticides by the American multinational, seeped out of the factory and spread through the town as people slept, killing thousands and permanently destroying the lives of countless others, 'countless' being the operative word here as official figures are hard to come by. Officially the death toll was 6000, and over half a million people have had their

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health permanently destroyed by the disaster, but the locals reckon that these figures are somewhat conservative.

Of course Union Carbide, a big bastard of a conglomerate, struck a deal with the Indian government as far as compensation went, so precious little has actually appeared and helped those who lost everything, and although Bhopal is back to relative normality and Union Carbide has closed its factory and buggered off, the spectre of the world's worst ever industrial disaster looms in the past. Scary stuff indeed.

As for the town itself, it's just another busy Indian city with a few mosques, temples, museums and the like. Best left unsaid, I reckon.

Bumpy Ride North

My unexpected air-conditioned two-tier sleeper journey (a step above first class, and second only to the ultimate luxury, air-conditioned first class sleeper) was an eye-opener. After second-class sleepers, the cheapest class, AC was amazingly quiet (due to the windows being sealed) and full of little luxuries, like curtains to pull round your berth and individual reading lights. The *chai* men were also conspicuous by their absence, a major blessing worth paying five times the price for. Sure, the luxury of AC class was fairly illusory given the standard of my current lifestyle – in Europe these AC carriages

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would probably be consigned to the scrap heap and standard Indian second class would probably contravene a whole host of EU directives – but I found the long, long journey north simply wonderful after all the bouncy buses and rickety rickshaws of second class India.

It also gave me a chance to read my guidebook to Nepal, and I liked what I read. Not that India was getting me down – quite the opposite, in fact – but the idea of western food, some of the best trekking in the world, short distances to travel and a lack of Indian madness and mayhem all sounded like a holiday after over two months in the heat of the south. All I had to do was to get there…

The only blot on the smooth landscape of air-con heaven was the sudden change in body temperature I suffered at midnight, followed by a good old session heaving up my previous two meals in the less than salubrious environment of the India Railways toilet. It's funny how these fairly regular bouts of sickness have become simply a sideshow to the main picture, just another inconvenience like putting up the mosquito net every night and taking the daily dose of vitamins and minerals; I just hope it's not all being caused by one bug that steadfastly refuses to leave my system, or it might continue beyond my return.

Excluding the stomach, things went according to

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plan, and before I knew it I'd arrived at Gorakhpur, hopped on the bus, and had arrived at Sunauli, one of the few the border towns with Nepal. I spent a few amusing hours wandering back and forth over the border, which nobody seemed to mind one bit, so now I can say I've been an illegal immigrant in Nepal, another useful snippet for those cocktail parties looming in my future; I changed some money, booked a bus for the morning to Pokhara, and settled in to enjoy my last night in India for a month. Needless to say, I ate myself back to health in my rather pleasant hotel, and hit the sack, ready to tackle Nepal in the morning.

Thoughts on Leaving

Written: 28 March 1998

So that's the end of my first three months in India, but am I any the wiser? I'm not sure, really: all I can think of is a phrase from James Hawes' *A White Merc with Fins* where the anti-heroine, Suzy, is joking about going to India for three months. In a fit of accuracy, she decides not to bother because she'll just end up 'losing two stone and talking shite'. Unwittingly, Hawes' description is accurate as hell.

It's easy to talk shite about India, if only because it's so full of contradictions that it's hard to be definitive about anything. On one hand I say that I very much like

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the people, but then again I think back to all the scams, lies, cons and hassles encountered over the last six months, and although Indonesia annoyed me more on that score, India is up there with the best. Then the food: on one hand it's excellent (I've always been very fond of curries and spices, after all), but it can be pretty depressing when all you've got is another bloody meal of *dhal* and rice again.

The health aspect, although it looked promising for a while, is terrible. I forget how many times I was ill in India, and I was pretty damn careful about my intake. And then there's the permanent Indian head cold, the aches and pains of being crammed onto public transport for amazingly long sessions with bad suspension, the constant annoyance of mosquitoes, the dubious quality of a lot of India's ablutions and, to cap it all, a fairly serious recurrence of my salt-sore eczema now that my Australian skin cream has run out.

But this is all part of it, of course. I'm fully aware that if I really wanted solid shits I could have flown home, but for some masochistic reason I never entertained the idea. The reason is, of course, that I utterly, utterly love India, despite its inherent frustrations. Perhaps it is because of the everyday contradictions that it is so fascinating, or because its size gives it an implicit variety, but it was obvious as soon as I ducked out of India into Nepal – I felt a strangely alien

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sense of loss. The safe tranquillity of the tourist haven of Nepal was complete bliss, but I couldn't help thinking that it was missing some spark, and I couldn't wait to get back into India.

One guy I met told me that travelling anywhere else in the world after India was bound to be boring, which is why he kept coming back. I sincerely hope this isn't true, but if it is I can understand why: India has to be the most amazingly magnetic and repellent country I've ever experienced. I can't wait to return after my visit to Nepal, even if it means being constantly ill. It's worth it.

At this point in my journey I left India to travel through Nepal, which you can read about in another of my books, Roof of the World: Travels in Nepal *(also available for free from* **www.moxon.net**). *From Nepal I returned to India, which is where the next chapter picks up the story…*

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West Bengal

The Toy Train

Written: 12 May 1998

Noel Gallagher once wrote, ‘These are crazy days but they make me shine,’ and he was spot on; India is crazy, but it sure as hell makes me shine. Despite my extensive experience even the railways are totally insane: take the train into Darjeeling, for example. There are no traffic lights on the railway line from Siliguri to Darjeeling; instead, a lone man stands in the middle of the humid jungle waving a red flag. This fits in well with the whole Toy Train experience.

For the train from the plains up to the hill station of Darjeeling is no ordinary train, it’s a tiny steam train locally known as the Toy Train. Taking eight timetable hours to screech its way up the 80km to the most famous tea-producing area in India, the journey is a combination of ancient technology and the seemingly archaic Indian way of doing things: at one point we sat on the tracks for what felt like ages, waiting for a group of five workmen to mend the track which had washed away in the rains.

The name ‘steam train’ is misleading too; looking at pictures of classic locomotives belching white from their

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chimneys I used to think that the train was throwing out clouds of steam, but then my science lessons taught me that it was smoke from the boiler. The Toy Train to Darjeeling proved the point: as we toiled our way up the mountains we left a trail of black smoke in the sky, and at every corner bits of hot coal ash would waft into the carriage, covering people and packs in a fine layer of soot and pin-pricking the skin with dissipating heat.

But this didn't deter from a delightful journey. When I first heard the distinctive chugging of the steam engine – 4/4 time, one repeated bar of two forte treble crochets and two piano bass crotchets, played at varying speeds depending on the gradient – I thought of Thomas the Tank Engine and his Fat Controller, but this wasn't quite right: Thomas and his friends were huge engines, dwarfing the cute stick men as they stood statically though Ringo's narration. A more accurate analogy is Ivor the Engine, and although the hilly scenery wasn't quite the Welsh valleys, I could almost imagine the dragons sitting on the engine and hatching their babies.

I very much doubt the Reverend inventor of Thomas envisaged Indian traffic, though. The railway follows the road for the main part[33], crossing it fairly

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[33] Which means you pass wonderful signs such as: 'If you want to donate blood, do not do it on the road, donate it in the blood bank'; 'It is better to be 15 minutes late in this world than to be 15 minutes earlier in the next'; and, rather worryingly, 'Love thy neighbour… but not while driving.' Pity nobody takes a blind bit of notice.

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regularly, and therein lies the problem: trains have brakes that take ages to work, Indian truck drivers aren't aware that their vehicles have brakes in the first place, and the prospect of train meeting truck on the barricade-free crossings is a real one. Add in the thrill of a narrow (2 ft) gauge train lurching and bumping its way through the undergrowth, and you have an experience that is as close to luxury train travel as ocean passages are to cruising.

Another thing that hardly ever happened in the books was the train running out of water, but this being India it wasn't long before we ground to yet another halt, and this time stayed there. In a typical engineer's solution to the problem of getting a train up a severely steep hillside, the track is full of switchbacks where the train has to zigzag backwards and forwards, gradually ascending the hill by judicious use of points (each changed by a lonely old man hiding from the rain in a decrepit old brick house). It wasn't, then, much of a surprise that after a few hours on board we'd yet again backed into a dead end and stopped.

After fifteen minutes I stuck my head out of the window and tried to see why we still weren't moving. The fact that there was no engine may have had something do with it, but typically nobody had thought to inform the passengers that the train had run out of water and needed to go off for a refill; we were already

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running late from the work on the track, and it was quite obvious that we were going nowhere, and for a very long time.

Luckily the siding was still close to the road, so I hit the track, walked down to the road and eventually hailed a bus. The heavens opened, I got to Darjeeling before long, and that was the Toy Train experience. ‘Not to be missed’ was the guidebook’s accidentally accurate summary; ‘Not to be trusted’ would have been more accurate.

Crazy days indeed.

Darjeeling

Written: 12 May 1998

Darjeeling is one of India’s most famous hill stations, renowned of course for its tea. Most of the hill stations I’ve visited – the Cameron Highlands, Kodaikanal, Dieng and so on – are situated in valleys, with a pleasant town centre surrounded by hills studded with beautiful residences. Not so Darjeeling: this hill station lives at an altitude of 2134m on a west-facing slope, which makes direction finding easy (you either go up or down, or left or right) but walking tiring.

The town itself is fairly large. From above, Darjeeling looks like most Indian dwellings, with rusty tin roofs, ugly black water tanks and washing draped

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just about everywhere, but the slope manages to remove the claustrophobic feeling normally associated with most closely cropped and crowded places. Walk up the hill and you can look down on the whole town with views down to the deep valley floor below, and if the weather is clear you can see the western Himalayas dominating the horizon, with Everest just visible as a deceptively diminutive peak among the closer mountains. That's if the weather is clear.

Like other hill stations, the summer temperatures in Darjeeling are simply divine compared to the sweat and toil of the plains below, but the price you pay as the monsoon approaches is lots of cloud, a fair amount of rain and a total lack of views. My hotel room, complete with balcony and the familiar stain of wet mould in the corner, would have provided me with the perfect setting for sipping tea and talking politics, but all it managed was a view reminiscent of that from a 747 flying over wintry Europe. I had expected this, and having spent weeks surrounded by Himalayan mountains I wasn't exactly disappointed, but it did make it harder to get motivated about exploring the area. But explore we did.

And occasional glimpses through the fog made it worthwhile. The snow leopard, the only breeding programme in southern Asia and the only one in the world that has had any kind of success, was well worth the hour's walk from town; the endangered snow

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leopard is a superbly beautiful creature, especially the cubs, and as they gambolled round their cages we talked to the man in charge of the programme, learning as much about Asian politics as we did about snow leopards.

The grandly named Darjeeling Rangeet Valley Passenger Ropeway is another interesting attraction, not so much because the cable car is anything fantastic (though the views over the rolling fields of tea bushes are decidedly photogenic) but because the thrill of putting your life in the hands of the first ever Indian cable car really gets the adrenalin flowing. Rattling our way down the hill and back up again in a car complete with smashed window and a door you couldn't open from the inside, we managed to complete the journey without serious incident (luckily the ropeway isn't steam-powered).

It is, however, a good way to get below the high cloud that smothers the town at this time of year, and at last we got a glimpse of the Himalayas, albeit a long way away and not the group containing Everest. For the latter we had to be content with the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute Museum, a fascinating collection of stories and memorabilia from the various Everest expeditions; the late Tenzing Norgay, one of the first two[34] to reach the top of Everest, lived in

[34] Hillary and Tenzing have always kept quiet about who actually

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Darjeeling, and the museum he helped to set up is full of his equipment.

Then there was the botanical garden, a pleasant green park on the sloping valley sides just below the town, which was surprising not so much for its flora and ponds but for the peace and quiet which is afforded; this made hitting the high street a serious culture shock, with its myriad shops selling Tibetan goods and cramped market backstreets heaving with cobblers, tailors, *pan* shops and tea vendors. Darjeeling is a holiday spot in every way, and the number of Indian tourists milling around creating fascinating chaos showed just how popular such a set up is.

But the most important thing to do in Darjeeling is to relax with a nice pot of tea and a good view or, failing the latter, a comfortable chair. Every day that we were in Darjeeling Chris, Martina and I found our way to Glenary's, a reminder of the days of the Raj with its smart waiters, impeccable service, excellent food and an anachronistically high-ceilinged dining room that, in the winter, would be flickeringly lit by the roar of the fire at

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reached the top first, which is an interesting story. If you ask a westerner who climbed Everest first, the answer will be 'Edmund Hillary'; ask someone from the Indian subcontinent and the emphasis is on Tenzing Norgay. They're both right, because nobody knows except the two who made it; the flags flown on the summit were the Union Jack (for New Zealander Hillary), Indian (for Norgay) and Nepalese (Everest is in Nepal), but I bet most people only remember the Union Jack, unless they're Indian or Nepalese.

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one end. But we didn't need fire, we just needed tea, and not surprisingly the tea in Darjeeling is excellent, and not just because it's served western-style. If you order *chai* in India, you'll get a grubby glass filled with an incredibly milky and teeth-crunchingly sweet concoction that is made by filtering violently boiling milk through the tea-maker's equivalent of the old sock filled with tea leaves, and after throwing it around a bit in a style faintly reminiscent of flashy bartenders (though that's where any similarity between an Indian *chai* stall owner and a waistcoat-clad cocktail expert ends, believe me) he'll present it to you with a bill for two rupees. It actually tastes good, but it's nothing like tea as westerners know it.

In Darjeeling, however, you get a pot of local tea, a tea strainer, a jug of hot milk, sugar in a bowl and time to enjoy yourself. Darjeeling tea is a mild-flavoured brew compared to fiery Lapsang Suchong or the slightly sickly spices of Earl Grey – experts probably use words like 'delicate' and 'subtle' – so it's a godsend that it's not treated with the usual Indian courtesy: the flavour would be totally crushed if it was served through a sock.

The tea isn't the only important part of Afternoon Tea: don't forget tiffin. Immortalised by Sid James in *Carry On Up The Khyber* (whose sessions behind locked doors with various big-bosomed beauties of the Raj he referred to as 'a bit of tiffin') the Indian word

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‘tiffin’ means a snack, yet another Indian word that has found its way into everyday English[35]. Tiffin in Darjeeling means cakes, and lots of them, and between the three of us we managed to build up enough fatty residue to see us through the meanest of Indian illnesses. I shan’t annoy you by mentioning the prices: suffice to say that a hoard of cakes and a couple of pots of tea came in well under £1, and that back in England I wouldn’t visit an establishment like Glenary’s without an expense account or a benefactor in tow. How the other half live[36]…

Tea Terminology

Actually the whole subject of tea deserves a separate section, if only because the sheer complexity of it makes PG Tips look positively plebeian. Ready for a whole new world? Then we’ll begin.

Darjeeling tea isn’t just one type of tea, it’s a whole

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[35] There are lots of Indian words that have made it into English. Verandah, guru, pyjamas, sandals, ganja, dungarees, shampoo, khaki, jungle, loot, monsoon, hookah, curry… all these are Indian words that we commonly use today. There are more than you think.

[36] One rich middle class Indian told me that if you have money, India is the best country in the world to live, and not just because it’s cheap. With money you can live a lifestyle that’s as good as anything you can get in the West, but your money can also buy you all the drugs you want, as much corruption as you like (by judicious use of *baksheesh*) and can even get you the perfect spouse and produce well-educated kids to ensure the family fortune stays as the family fortune. If money is no object in the West, you can still get anything, but if you’re caught bribing, you can do time; in India, it’s all part of the social fabric, so not only can you get away with it, you do.

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family of the buggers: talking about Darjeeling tea is a bit like saying someone speaks English, when they could be speaking Geordie, Australian, New Jersey, Inglish, Cockney and so on. And like accents, some teas have class, and others are simply embarrassing.

A look at the processing method used in the Happy Valley Tea Estate shows how one bush can produce five different varieties. The picked leaves are placed in long trays to a depth of about 20cm where air is blown from underneath to drive out moisture in a two-stage process, six hours of cold air and six hours of hot; this reduces the moisture content of the green leaves from 75 per cent to 35 per cent.

The leaves then pass into a rolling machine where they are rolled and crushed for 45 minutes to bring out the juices from the cells, after which a sifter machine separates out any leaves that are too big. Fermentation is next, where the leaves are left on cold metal shelves for two to three hours to ferment in their juices, turning the colour from green to brown; they are then passed through the drying machine, a long conveyor through a furnace set to 117°C where the moisture is reduced to about 2 per cent. Finally the leaves, now ready to brew up, are sorted into categories according to leaf size, the smaller leaves being the best quality; at the Happy Valley the teas produced are, in order of quality with the best first, Orange Pekoe, Golden Flower, Golden

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Supremo, Supremo and Tea Bags.

But it's not just the drying and fermenting process that creates categories of tea, it's also the picking method used before the leaves are processed. Tea bushes are squat little affairs, and the leaves grow upwards in a manner reminiscent of bonsai yew trees; pruning is done off the top of the tree, and each branch produces three leaves, two mature outer leaves and a younger inner leaf. The best teas come from the tips of the mature leaves (as the younger leaf has less character), and so the picking method provides another part of the categorisation method.

The very finest Darjeeling tea is called Super Fine Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe, which is made from the top part of the two mature leaves. Next is Fine Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe, which is a coarse-plucking tea, meaning that all three leaves are plucked to make it. Then there's Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe, which has even coarser plucking (in other words, less care is taken). There is even a further distinction: the first two teas come from 'Chinese' plants with their small, thin leaves and better flavour, and the third is from 'Assam' plants with their thicker leaves and stronger (but less delicate) flavour.

But what does all this jargon mean? This is where it gets confusing, but basically the 'Super Fine Tippy' part refers to the picking method, the 'Golden Flowery' to

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which grade comes out of the final sifting machine, the ‘Orange’ denotes the colour of the tea when it is put into boiling water (orange is good and means the tea is whisky-coloured as opposed to the cheaper teas which turn the water a rum colour), and ‘Pekoe’ means that the tea flavour comes straight from the leaves rather than an added perfume. It’s as confusing as one would expect from India.

So you’ve decided on the type of tea you’d like to buy, but things have only just started. Within each type of tea are four broad bands denoting the time of year the tea was picked: First flush, Second flush, Rain flush and Autumn flush. The differences between the various flushes are as marked as the differences between vintages of wine, because tea quality is very dependent on climate; and because bushes are plucked in blocks, one block every 15-20 days, the same bushes can produce very different teas. The tea picking season is from March to November, and the best teas are picked in March, the so-called First flush; if tea is plucked after or during heavy rain, then the rain will have washed the flavour juices off the leaves and the tea will have less flavour, so the best flushes are during the dry spell (hence First and Autumn flushes are good).

Then within the flush categories are more specific details, and the quality varies surprisingly. For example, Super Fine Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe from

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the fourth week in March retails at Rs600 per kilogram, but from the second week in March it costs Rs1100 per kilogram, a major difference. It pays to research the product before buying.

And in case you really think you've done your research before hitting the tea shop, there are countless other types of Darjeeling tea, from Bio-organic tea (no pesticides or chemicals used, which is true for all teas but in this case the estate has a certificate to prove it) to Green tea (which uses a different manufacturing process to the rest). That's without even delving into other regions and all their intricacies, like Assam in India's northeast.

Of course the best way to buy tea is to ignore all the jargon and to go into the shop for a taste test of the product. Unfortunately your average tea shop doesn't have four hundred pots of hot tea for you to sample, so you have to check out the leaves themselves. Take a small pile of tea in your palm, close your fist and breathe through the tea to warm it up and moisturise it slightly. You then smell it with a deep breath, and make your choice.

I have to confess that all the teas I smelled seemed very much the same (even though they looked quite different, with the expensive teas quite fine and the cheaper ones much more burned and scrappy-looking) and the man in the tea shop confided that most of the

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locals couldn’t tell the teas apart either – only those with lots of experience could. Still, it’s all in the taste when you finally brew up.

But even then the tea experience isn’t simple. Should you add milk? Should you take sugar? Well, it depends on the tea: stronger teas from the Assam plant (not to be confused with Assam tea, which is tea grown in Assam) are fine with a little milk (‘Only a drop,’ said the tea shop owner, ‘because then they are getting the real tea taste’) but the more delicate Chinese plant teas should be taken without milk. And make sure to store your tea in a metal tin, not plastic or glass.

So next time you settle down for a cuppa, think about what you’re drinking. Though if it’s in a tea bag, goodness only knows where it’s come from…

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Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh

The Power of Authority

Written: 13 May 1998

Did I mention the Toy Train? I sure did, and I thought at the time that it would be my last train story, because up until this point my experience with Indian Railways had been moderately painless. Until Siliguri, that is…

The three of us, by now thick as thieves, took the jeep down from Darjeeling to Siliguri on Tuesday 12th May, hoping to be able to book a train ticket to Varanasi on the overnight train. I knew that the train would almost certainly be full for that night, but having had no real problems with booking a ticket before (except for Bhopal to Gorakhpur, but that was due to Rama's birthday) I reckoned we'd be all right for the night after.

We arrived at Siliguri's main station, NJP, in mid-afternoon and joined the queue at the ticket counter. However, when we reached the counter we discovered that we could only buy tickets for seats there, not berths, and we should go to the other side of the station to see the Ticket Collector, who would help us. We did as we were told, but the Ticket Collector had very little

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English and proved pretty useless, sending us back to the same queue at the ticket counter. Again the ticket counter refused to help, but a return journey to the Ticket Collector finally produced an address, the location of Siliguri's railway booking office. I couldn't believe that NJP, a major station, didn't have its own booking system, but shrugging at the madness of it all we took a rickshaw to the booking office, a good few kilometres away and a cosy ride with all our backpacks stuffed behind us.

At the booking office I joined the queue at the Information Counter to ask about availability of berths on the train, and when I finally reached the man he told me it was well nigh impossible to get sleepers out of NJP towards Delhi, as they were all full for days, but if I joined the ticket queue and bought a waiting list ticket for the journey I required, then I could come back and have a word with the Reservations Officer about getting in on an emergency quota. I thanked him and joined the shortest queue for tickets; inevitably this counter closed as I reached the front, so I joined the back of the only other queue, which was still waiting for its counter to open. After maybe three-quarters of an hour I got to the front of the queue, handed my reservation form over, and the man frowned. 'For tonight?' he said. 'Or tomorrow,' I replied, explaining what the man at the Information Counter had said. The ticket man

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disappeared, came back and asked me to wait. This I did for a quarter of an hour, after which he left the room, came back and sent me right back to the Information Counter.

The man at the Information Counter wasn't exactly thrilled to see me again, and said I still had to get a waiting list ticket before I could get onto the emergency quota. Armed with my timetable I grilled him about availability on other trains, but all the trains were booked up for at least four days, there weren't any first class berths available, and I really didn't fancy an overnight bus ride through the sweaty fields of the Gangetic plain. Eventually he handed me over to the Reservations Officer, a fat man with an attitude problem, who told me exactly what I needed to do if I wanted to get onto his emergency quota. 'Get a waiting list ticket,' he said, smiling smugly, 'then bring your passport and proof of money exchange, and we will see what we can do.'

I could feel him enjoying The Power, a strange opiate one feels when one knows one has complete authority over a situation, and someone without that authority wants what only you can give them. In India, coping with The Power is an essential part of survival: to get what you want you have to kowtow to sad little men who have snaked their way up the ranks of the railway company, always being polite when what you'd

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rather do is mash the bastard's face into your right kneecap. I coped admirably, repeating in my head the anti-Power mantra, 'I can always leave India, this poor bastard can't…'

Returning to the ticket queue for half an hour and five Marlboros, I finally got a waiting list ticket for the next day's train, as today's had already started on its journey and I couldn't get a waiting list ticket for a train that was already on the move, could I? Then it was back to the man with The Power, and roping in Martina and her encashment certificates, we handed over our passports, sycophantically helping the bulbous idiot to decipher the calendar and work out that thirteen comes after twelve and that tomorrow comes after today; but after crawling through the dirt and kissing his boots we finally got the assurance that we would have three berths for the journey tomorrow night, and all we had to do was turn up at the station and we'd be in the computer and on the train. I thanked him gushingly and walked off, unconvinced that he would actually be of any help.

After spending the next day shopping and playing cards in the fairly nondescript boom town that is Siliguri, we turned up at the railway station on time and went to the reservations counter, where we discovered that two of us had a berth, but mysteriously the third one didn't. This meant that I had to spend until 2.15am that night being as nice as pie to the conductor, another man

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who wielded The Power, in an attempt to persuade him to find me a berth on the impossibly crowded train. To his credit he did find me a place to sleep and didn't even ask for *baksheesh*, but this final bending over backwards to blow sunshine up this man's anus had washed me out, and I spent the night out like a light. When I awoke, we were well on our way to Varanasi, and all I did was plug in my Walkman and stare out of the window. It was bliss to be temporarily disconnected.

Death of the Ganges

Written: 16 May 1998

The Ganges has long been associated with life-giving properties, but scientific studies may have found a reason behind the myth. Unfortunately, it might be too late, as the Ganges is highly polluted.

At Patna, a few days after celebrating the 1997 Chhath festival on the banks of the Ganges, several devotees suddenly suffered from skin eruptions, red spots and other skin irritations. Apparently it was the 'holy dip' in the Ganges that had led to this problem: something in the water, possibly a result of indiscriminate waste disposal into the river, had triggered off this reaction.

Cynical though it may sound, such an incident was simply waiting to happen, as the rivers in India are

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basically treated like glorified sewers. On the one hand they are considered sacred, and on the other they are abused day in and day out by the very populace that reveres them. Religious ceremonies and practices that have been followed for centuries only help to spread infection, and it's highly unlikely that things will change.

Along its 2525km-long course, the Ganges receives mostly untreated sewage from 27 major towns. The Ganges Action Plan (GAP), which is touted as the centrepiece of river cleaning policy in India, has spent more than 4.5 billion rupees on the problem, but with little concrete success. The reality is that in all the main towns situated on the banks of the Ganges, untreated and partially treated sewage still flows into the river. The sewage treatment plants lie idle for most of the day because there's no power to run them, lots of the pumps are clogged up with plastic bags, and as an example of the lack of progress, in Patna the public toilets have been converted into offices, and the town sewage ponds serve as cricket grounds.

The waters of the Ganges have always had the strange quality of not putrefying, even after long periods of storage. Scientific studies carried out by Roorkee University in the early 1980s confirmed an age-old belief that its waters were special; the Ganges was shown to have a unique quality in that it has a

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remarkable self-cleansing ability, certainly better than any river in the world. It also has a very high oxygen-retaining capacity, which explains why its waters remain fresh over long periods of storage.

Conducted between 1982 and 1984, the studies indicated that concentrations of disease causing bacteria, which shot up at waste dumping points along the river, reduced by almost 90 per cent 7 to 10km downstream from the dumps. As far back as 1896, E. Hanbury Hankin, a British physician, reported in the *Annales de l'Institut Pasteur* that cholera microbes died within three hours in Ganges water, while they continued to thrive after 48 hours in distilled water.

When such a unique and remarkable river becomes the source of skin problems, it is reflective of the river's degradation. Essentially a 'pipes and pumps' scheme, the GAP is being replicated in 14 polluted rivers in the country without anyone asking whether the original GAP has worked. While sewers and sewage treatment are an absolute necessity in any town or city, mindlessly repeating an expensive and arguably unsuccessful plan is probably not the best way to tackle the situation.

It seems that the rivers, however holy, are destined to die.

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Varanasi

Written: 20 May 1998

If you had to choose one city to represent everything that is really Indian, you would probably choose Varanasi. This means it is a fascinating place; it also means it's almost impossible to describe on paper.

The first area of Varanasi is the main business district, known as the Cantonment area. Almost every city has a Cantonment area: this was the Raj-era term for the administrative and military area of a city, and most cities retain the Cantonment name for the central part. Varanasi's core is also its least interesting area, so let's dispense with it quickly: if you want a train ticket or a bank, go to the Cantonment, otherwise you're better off hanging out in the two other main areas of town.

Varanasi is built along the west bank of the Ganges which, in an attempt to avoid the hills to the east in Bihar, turns north towards the Ghaghara River; this means that the river flows north at Varanasi, against all intuition, and Varanasi is perched on the west bank, facing into the sunrise. All along this bank is the second area of town, a long line of *ghats*[37] stretching for some

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[37] *Ghats* are stone steps leading down into a river or lake; they're also bloody slippery, so it wasn't a huge surprise when I saw a little boy slip over just below my balcony and crack the back of his head open. The Western Ghats, with a capital G, are the hills in southern India, but *ghats* with no capitalisation are everywhere in India. Varanasi is probably the most famous *ghat* city in the country, though.

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six or seven kilometres between the famous Benares Hindu University in the south and the large railway bridge in the north. Inland from the *ghats*, to the west, is the third area, the old town, where things start to get really interesting. It's the *ghats* and the old town that make Varanasi what it is.

Finding a Hotel

Arriving in Varanasi after a long train journey, your first experience is one of total confusion and disorientation.

It is a guarantee that your rickshaw driver will totally ignore your instructions to take you to the hotel you've told him (in our case Ajay's Guest House overlooking Rana *ghat*) and will instead stop outside a hotel which gives him a healthy commission: I just sat there and refused to budge until he started his motor up again and took me where I wanted to go.

This infuriated the hotel owner who pretended to take our snub as a comment on his hotel ('Rooms very nice sir, just five minutes' walk to the river, very clean') but I wasn't going to fall for a rickshaw driver's trick this far into my Indian experience… so eventually we found ourselves dropped somewhere else entirely, though exactly where we were we couldn't work out: the rickshaw driver told us he couldn't drive right down to the *ghats* (a lie, I later found out, as rickshaws ran over my toes right at the top of the steps) so we were left

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to fend for ourselves. It took us a bloody long time to find what we wanted, but it was well worth the effort.

My guest house was right on the *ghats*, and from its roof I got a bird's eye view of the banks of the Ganges. What surprised me most was how one-sided Varanasi is: the east bank of the river is totally untouched by buildings, and the few shacks built by the water's edge are temporary to say the least. The river is perhaps 200m wide in this, the pre-monsoon season, but there's a very wide silt strip on the east bank that gets totally flooded in the monsoon, more than doubling the width of the river. It's no wonder the east bank is unpopulated if every year you lose your house, but it still surprised me that even on the permanent part of the eastern bank, where scrubby trees line the horizon, there were no houses at all. I would soon discover why Varanasi was perched on just one bank of the river…

The *Ghats*

Ghats are central to life in India. As part of their religion Hindus wash regularly – the Indian version of 'cleanliness is next to godliness' – and the *ghats* are *the* place to wash the body, the clothes, the crockery and anything else that gets dirty. But as I discovered in Hampi during the *tika*-scrubbing of Holi, the *ghats* are not just communal baths, they're the Indian equivalent of the local pub. Watching *ghats* through the day is

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instructive; they start to liven up before the sun rises, when those with early starting jobs mingle with the particularly pious in a morning scrub to wake up the senses and rub off the smell of another hot, sweaty tropical night. The busiest time is after sunrise when everyone turns up for their morning ablutions and absolutions; kids frolic in the river, playing games with the tourist boats while their mothers start on the clothes washing and old men consider how long it will be before they'll be floating down the river permanently.

This is the essence of India. While the kids splash more water out of the Ganges than the monsoon puts in, a solitary man prays towards the sun, chanting Hindu prayers and scooping water up in his cupped hands, pouring the holy river out in a parabola in front of him, repeating the slow movement five or six times before moving on to other stages of his *puja*: turning round, holding his hands together in prayer and immersing himself fully before continuing his mumbling. Suddenly his prayer is finished, and it is as if for the first time he notices the cacophony around him, the beginning of a whole new day in India.

While the old man prays the women are bathing at another end of the *ghat*: in some *ghats* the division of men and women is so obvious it hurts the morning-sensitive eyes. One end of the *ghat* is covered in brown bodies, scantily clad in tightly tucked cloths tied round

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the midriff and leaping around like lizards on a hot tile floor, and the other end is the shock of colourful sarees and dresses that Indian women have made their own. The reason for the division is the patriarchal society: men can strip down to briefs that would make tourists on a Thai beach do a double take, but the women have to bathe in full attire, showing nothing more than a bit of ankle and a strip round the waist; I watched women having full soapy baths without removing a stitch, the expert slipping of soap under the layers a result of ritual and acceptance of the status quo. I can't imagine having a bath with my clothes on, and I doubt Indian men can either, but they make their women put up with it; it's an indication of the strength of the female spirit in India that, even during the morning wash, the women manage to retain their radiance and beauty to the shame of the dawdling and gangly men. It's also a poignant reminder that the men don't deserve their chauvinist domination.

After the morning rush hour the *ghats* calm down, for the sun has come up over the horizon and is making sure that everyone knows that it's summer. The stone steps begin to heat up, the hotel rooms overlooking the river flood with sunlight, forcing the occupants to get up and open their windows, and the boats start to return their sightseeing punters back to shore. The men and some of the women disappear into their jobs in town, and the remaining women settle down to another day of

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cooking, cleaning, washing, looking after the kids and catching up with the gossip from next door. People still come and wash at the *ghats*, and pilgrims still turn up to bathe in the healing waters of the Ganges, but until the sun has crossed the sky the biggest activity on the *ghats* involves catching and conning tourists, and the burning of bodies at the two burning *ghats*.

Come late evening the men start to drift back towards the river, now shaded from the sun by the buildings at the edge of the old city. Sitting on the steps with their portable stoves and socks stuffed with cheap tea leaves, the *chai* vendors make a killing as men come back from work and tarry a while before the evening meal, being slaved over by a hard-worked wife somewhere in the bowels of the city. At this time many people take another dip to remove the scum layer gained in the searing heat of the day, kids jumping around as if to prove that even a long, hot day in the dusty atmosphere of the city streets isn't enough to dent their enthusiasm for life.

Finally, as the sun goes down, the *ghats* have their last wind, and people come out to stroll along the promenade, to catch up on any gossip they may have missed, to have another wash and just to sit and watch the world go by. Darkness falls, the lights come on, and slowly people drift off to bed – a lot of them sleeping on the *ghats* themselves – before finally Varanasi falls

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silent, except for the thousands of noisily territorial dogs that plague urban India. Some souls are never at peace with the world.

The Burning *Ghats*

Each *ghat* has its function beyond being a social centre. There are over one hundred *ghats* in Varanasi, and while some of them are crumbling and obviously not used for much beyond being somewhere convenient to crap, most have a specific function. Five of the *ghats* – Asi, Dasaswamedh, Barnasangam, Panchganga and Maikarnika – are the special *ghats* where Hindu pilgrims must bathe each day, in that order; other *ghats* are where the Muslims hang out with their little skull caps; others are used by the dhobi-*wallahs* to thrash the shit out of the clothes they've got to wash, facilitated by the flat rocks positioned at regular intervals just in the water; yet another is for Jain worshippers; the ascetics hang out at the Dandi *ghat* discussing how long it is since they had a good meal; the Mir *ghat* leads to a temple for Nepalese worshippers; and others have special powers, such as the Somewar *ghat* which is particularly good at healing diseases. In much the same way as some prefer the Dog and Duck over the Queen's Head, everyone in Varanasi has their local *ghat*, though seeing as alcohol is banned in the central town, they

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have to make do with a sip of the Ganges[38].

Easily the most infamous *ghats* are Jalsain and Harishchandra, at least as far as westerners are concerned: these are the burning *ghats* where cremations take place. Varanasi isn't just a city with lots of *ghats* and temples, it's a seriously holy place, so holy in fact that dying and having your body dumped in the Ganges there is so auspicious that it's a guaranteed way of getting to heaven. This strikes me as one of the more bizarre aspects of Hinduism: if you can get to heaven simply by dying in Varanasi and making the correct arrangements, then why give a shit about karma and caste and working hard all your life, why not just enjoy life and make sure you die in Varanasi?

But not everybody can afford to die in Varanasi. The wood for the cremation costs money, quite a lot of it, and I was told that if someone dies in the street, the authorities wait until people have thrown enough money onto the body before they burn it; on the other hand, I was also told that there's a dump truck that goes around collecting dead bodies, but whatever the truth, the sleeping beggars probably get a swift kick in the ribs every now and then, just to make sure they're still with us.

I was rather paranoid about approaching the burning

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[38] Though some would suggest that the Ganges has more of a kick than alcohol – it certainly has more living matter in it than real ale.

ghats, not so much because of the many travellers' tales I'd heard about cons, hassles and rip-offs there, but because I felt it was none of my business. What would you think if, just as you were standing in the graveyard watching your dearly beloved being lowered into the frozen winter soil, a bunch of yelping tourists came up and started taking pictures, saying things like, 'That's sick, man, check out that guy's burning hair!' and 'Shit, this place stinks worse than a fuckin' butcher's shop!' I didn't want to get involved.

But it's impossible to avoid the whole scene, and I wasn't going to miss out on seeing such a strange sight. Jalsain is the main burning *ghat*[39], and as the bodies are brought in by relatives on stretchers, entirely covered in garish red and gold fabrics, the clockwork efficiency of the system seems at odds with the importance of the occasion, for being cremated and scattered in the Ganges is the Hindu equivalent of being buried in Westminster Abbey. After the relatives wash the body in the Ganges for the last time (simply by dipping the covered body in the river) it is placed on top of an orderly pile of logs by the workers (untouchables, the

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[39] Harishchandra is smaller, but it does have an electric crematorium and a resident *sadhu* whose penance (for goodness only knows what) is to eat bits of flesh as they roll out of the toaster. This is accepted here; the lowest of the low jobs is to deal with cremations, so the *sadhu* has effectively lowered himself as low as he can, like all good penitents. Makes a change from standing on your head for 12 years or going on hunger strike, both of which are far more sensible, of course.

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lowest caste of all) who neatly stack more logs on top before lighting the pyre. It doesn't take long for the fire to catch, and at any one time you can see two or three bodies burning steadily in the river breeze, giving off a smell disturbingly reminiscent of a barbecue.

A typical body takes three to four hours to burn, but there's always something left: for a woman it's the hips, and for a man the lower back (don't ask me why), and these are just chucked into the river for the dogs to fight over. Meanwhile the ashes are sifted by a man called the Watchman for gold and silver, which he gets to keep, and then they're scattered on the water (or, rather, shovelled in for the river to wash away later, there's so much ash). The whole process is surprisingly efficient and almost un-Indian in its cleanliness: after all cremation is the cleanest way to dispose of a body.

But there's a bit of Indian logic that makes all this cleanliness irrelevant. Not everyone is burned at the *ghats*, oh no. Holy cows, children less than twelve years old, and pregnant women are not burned because they are pure (in the latter case it's the baby who is pure) and the whole point of the fire is to cleanse the soul on its way to heaven; lepers and people suffering from other diseases ('People with poisons in their body' was how one chap referred to it) are also not burned, and along with the cows, children and pregnant women they're tied to a rock, rowed out into the middle of the river and

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dumped overboard.

That sounds just fine, but Indian ropes being Indian ropes, these bodies soon find their way to the surface, and due to the gentleness of the current in the non-monsoon Ganges they can hang around for quite some time before the birds and dogs finally get to them. During this time they tend to drift over to the east bank, which probably explains why there isn't a great deal of housing there, daily dead body delivery not being up there in the estate agent's list of desirable attributes. Taking a boat on the river, a delightful experience especially at sunrise, is a wonderful and cheap way to enjoy the *ghat* area, but if you're squeamish then the floating bodies with their gaping skulls picked almost clean by the birds, and the faintly familiar rib cages stacked on the east bank, may put you off your breakfast.

Not the Indians, though. Despite the common occurrence of dead humans and bloated cows floating past, everyone still bathes and drinks at their local *ghat*. On top of the obvious hygiene issues raised by bathing with the dead, there are plenty of other hygienic *faux pas*, such as one man bathing ten feet from another one pissing in the river, all of which is enough to make you more wary of the Ganges than you are about strangers calling you 'friend' and salesmen who offer you their 'best price'. This is a shame, because the Ganges in

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Varanasi isn't the mud-slicked quagmire I would expect from a river that has had to struggle its way through thousands of miles of Indians using it as a moving rubbish dump cum sewer[40]: in fact it's a pleasant deep blue, and it's only on closer inspection you see all the rubbish collected on the banks and the shit collected on the eastern side.

Ram Nagar Fort

Closer inspection was what I had in mind on my penultimate day in Varanasi. I had wanted to take a walk along the Ganges for some time, and not just because the Ganges is so famous; it's also surprisingly elusive for such a long river, and most of the well-known cities in India have nothing to do with it. Delhi and Agra are on the Yamuna River, Calcutta is on the Hooghly, Chennai and Mumbai are miles south of the Gangetic plains, and places like Darjeeling and Kashmir are a long way from the slow march of Mother Ganga. But it's the Ganges that everyone associates with India, and I wanted to check it out.

Setting out from my hotel I walked south down the west bank to a rickety pontoon bridge that spans the

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[40] And you can see why they do use it. On the train through Bihar, one of India's poorest and most densely populated states, I saw children bathing in pools so stagnant I had to look twice to determine whether it was water or not. People have to wash, and I suppose if there's a river there, they're going to use it. It sure beats stagnant pools.

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Ganges during the dry season. One look at it and you can see why it's not used in the monsoon: it's got enough holes and leaks to make it a scary proposition even if the Ganges dried up. Over on the east bank is the Ram Nagar Fort and, being a sucker for forts, I made straight for it as the sun began to get serious.

Inside the fort – where incidentally Queen Elizabeth stayed on her visit in 1958, when I assume the place had lots more class than it does now – was a rather sad museum containing nothing of merit except, as there was in Hyderabad, an exquisite collection of intricate ivory carvings. As I breezed past the moth-eaten clothes and decrepit dust buckets that were all that remained of the Maharaja of Benares' transport department, I fell into conversation with a well-spoken man called Ram who hailed from Andhra Pradesh. With his shaved head (apart from a tuft at the back) and *tika* mark he was obviously a Hindu, and he began to explain why he was in Varanasi.

'I have just committed the bones of my mother to the Ganges,' he said. 'That is why I have my head shaved: the eldest son has it done as a mark of respect.'

I offered my condolences, and asked him if being buried in the Ganges meant his mother was now in heaven.

'Yes,' he replied. 'If a person's bones are buried in

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the Ganges at Varanasi or Allahabad[41] then, as long as the bones remain in the river, that person will be in heaven. And with bones, they do not float, so he or she will remain in heaven forever.

'Many American Hindus come here to be cremated,' he added. 'I suppose they can easily afford the wood, but I do wonder why so many western tourists come to Varanasi. What is the attraction for them? They are not Hindus, so it can't be for the pilgrimage.'

I didn't tell him that it was probably the sick attraction of watching people like his mother burn, and instead waffled on about the amazing streets of the old city, the serenity of the Ganges and the multitude of cheap hotels. The only drawback was the heat, which is why the number of tourists is far less in the summer.

'It was 49 degrees here yesterday,' said Ram, surprising me considerably as I'd managed to cope pretty well; I initially thought he meant 39 degrees, but later I was to read about a heat wave cruising northern India, pushing the temperatures into the high forties. 'It is very hot, but it gets hotter in Andhra Pradesh, up into the fifties. Rajasthan will be hot: it is interesting that you are going there now. What is your reaction to the nuclear tests there?'

He was referring to the underground nuclear tests

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[41] About 100km west of Varanasi, where the Ganges meets the Yamuna.

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that the Indian government had just made in the Thar Desert north of Pokaran, a move which had earned the country trade sanctions and widespread criticism but which made sure India had made its point about defending itself against its arch-enemy, Pakistan. I told him I thought it was crazy that such a poor country should spend money on nuclear testing, but Ram's reaction was unexpected.

'India is not a poor country,' he said, 'but the Indians are a poor people. We have much corruption and terrorism here, and places like Kashmir are particularly dangerous.'

I replied that I had found people in the south to be marginally friendlier and less likely to rip you off than in the north, but he wasn't so sure, despite my comment being a backhanded compliment to his people.

'In the south they will argue with you,' he said, 'but in the north they will just cut your throat. Be careful.'

I thanked him for his advice and we parted; and having wandered around the fort to my satisfaction, I decided to walk right across town, but this time on the east bank. I wanted to see how a city could just stop at a river and not spring up on the other side, and what I saw confirmed my earlier theory.

East Bank of the Ganges

The east bank of the Ganges is a false one: dry, cracked

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mud stretches for a couple of hundred metres back from the water's edge, until it reaches a gradual rise where the vegetation can survive the monsoon without being washed out. I spent the first part of my walk in this scrubland of trees, grass and severe heat, a beautiful environment that is a total anathema to anything living.

The sun beat down on my bush hat, pushing sweat out through my clothes, down the back of my daypack and into my eyes, and it wasn't long before I wistfully thought of Noel Coward and his uncanny accuracy. I enjoyed it though, not having had a good dry scrub walk since Australia, and as I spotted the plume of blue smoke from the main burning *ghat* in the distance on the other side of the Ganges, I headed towards the water.

Crossing the mud flats to the sand banks I nearly stumbled into a huge sand mine, filled with trucks and men digging deep into the sand. I wondered how this affected all those pious Hindus up in heaven who had died in the monsoon; one assumes the workmen would chuck any bones they found into the river, but imagine how pissed off you'd be if you were suddenly plucked from paradise because some bastard found your femur some thirty feet down. Is nothing sacred here?

It seems not. I soon reached the east bank, which slides into the murky water without ceremony or embankment, and the first thing I noticed was the smell, the familiar stench of rotting garbage and sewage, but

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this time with an added twinge, a sour odour of burned meat; the burning *ghats* were in full swing, and the wind wasn't doing me any favours. I remembered the body I'd seen from the morning boat trip – upper half of the torso only, body still swathed and the face nothing but a cleaned skull, not hollow but not covered in flesh either – and prepared myself for the worst. I wasn't to be disappointed.

In all I came across six or seven rotting humans washed up on the shore: the uncertainty comes from my lack of expertise in biology, as one of them could have been anything. Some were simply bones, picked clean by the local dogs (who were particularly vicious and territorial, nearly attacking me as I wandered along); others were bloated like kangaroos by the side of the Australian highway, splitting open at the seams like some failed experiment in deep sea diving; one looked like a chicken wrapped in silk, floating in the tide, until I realised it must have been a baby; another one lay askew without a head, its skull six feet away catching the lapping waves and echoing the sound of the surf through its left eye; I found myself utterly detached, the reporter doing his job, and took a few photos in much the same way Quincy would have done. After seeing someone dying in front of my very eyes on the Nepalese highway, dead bodies were nothing to me.

Just downstream from the most disgusting corpse –

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all I could think of was Lennon's 'Semolina pilchard/Dripping from a dead dog's eye' – was a young man having a wash; he even drank the water, obviously enjoying the coolness of Mother Ganga on his skin. This I found more disturbing than the rictus grins behind me, and as I wandered further north towards the railway bridge, I encountered a number of other people in the water. One pair of stalwarts was dragging a huge net along the current, giving new meaning to the phrase 'fishers of men'; three others were peeling the hide off a stunningly rotten and pungent cow that had been floating in the river for far too long and which we'd passed on our morning boat trip two days before; women crouched in huts and brewed tea; and despite this human presence, I came across yet more decaying unfortunates who were not only no longer in heaven, they were almost certainly in hell.

And unbelievably the people on the east bank, though few in number, were markedly friendlier than the inhabitants of the city. I suppose when you're surrounded by dead rich people who have been washed up from heaven you lose a lot of your bigotries; every day you're reminded that we are all dust in the end, whatever our status in life. Every one of them said hello, and lots of them tried to start a conversation in Hindi (with little success); in the city all I ever got was the usual chanting of 'Hello friend, you want cold

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drink/cigarettes/hotel/massage (delete as applicable)?' 'Hello friend' is an especially obnoxious phrase; 'Hello mister' is simply inane and faintly amusing, and the normal 'Hello sir' the Indians use is polite and fine by me, but 'Hello friend'?

This is a country where they leave their friends bobbing on the east bank for the dogs and maggots, for goodness sake. No thanks, friend.

The Old City

Yes, the *ghats* are quite stunning, and make for some interesting walks. But behind every great man is a great woman, and behind the craziness of the *ghats* is the even more intense insanity of the old city. Like all cities that grow up steadily and totally unplanned, the old city is chaos, but it's a different sort of chaos from the more normal traffic and population clash of India's cities: in the old city of Varanasi the streets are seldom wider than eight feet, so there are no cars, no rickshaws and not so many people. It sounds like heaven.

But of course it's not. You can take the cars off the streets but you can't do anything about the cows, and Varanasi being such a holy city, it's packed with wandering beef. Cows, being docile beasts and fairly slow-moving, are not much of a problem as you can slide past them pretty easily, but 'slide' is the operative word: where there are cows there is cow shit, and if you

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take the number of cows in Varanasi and think how many pats they drop in your average day, you can understand why the streets of Varanasi are coated in the stuff. It helps to keep the dust down, but it means you have to keep your head down when you're walking, especially at night.

Apart from the cows there are millions of dogs, loads of goats, plenty of rats and various other examples of Noah's work kicking around the backstreets, but the animals aren't the main obstacles when you run the old city gauntlet. Shop owners entice you into their tiny hovels with a 'Hello, you want something?'; *sadhus* stutter past in dulled saffron robes, some floating on *bhang* and some just floating naturally; push bikes click along the cobbles as the riders get off to push them, and there's even the odd motorcycle brave enough to slosh through the shit, even though it's probably quicker to walk; hashish sellers saunter up with their mantra of 'Good hash, Manali hash, best quality, cheap price' and, when you ignore them, a hopeful 'Maybe later, sir? I see you tomorrow?'; and always there are sights to grab the eyes, things that make all the slip-sliding worthwhile.

That is, there are if you can work out how to find them. It took me a while to find out that the worst possible way of exploring the old city is to try to use a map: some places in this world are impossible to depict on paper, and Varanasi is one of them, up there with

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Caen (where we would always get lost on family holidays) and the jungle paths of Taman Negara.

In fact the best thing to do in Varanasi is to ditch the map in the cow dung and fish out a compass: the Ganges is always east, the Cantonment is west, and if you get really stuck you can always head for the *ghats*. I spent hours wandering round the streets, discovering beautiful mosques such as the Great Mosque of Aurangzeb (where I met a delightful Swiss girl called Katya who had just finished a five-year dance course in Uzbekistan and who was floating round the world in search of inspiration for the future), Hindu temples galore, kids playing marbles in the street, urchins showering under broken pipes in the gutter, women making offerings in tiny Siva shrines, beggars napping in the shade offered by the thin street… the whole of Indian culture lives in the streets of the old city.

And at night the place is transformed, and not just because nobody can tell what they are treading in. Frequent power cuts notwithstanding, the ill-lit arteries of the heart of the city provide you with plenty to see: peering in through a half-closed door you can see a father teaching his son the tools of his *pan*-making trade, the child's eyes wide with wonder in the flickering candle light; smoke billows out of a dull red glow where large pots of milk boil and men work over their sweet making, silhouetted demons sweating in a

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man-made inferno; a man stands in front of a statue of Ganesh, the stonework almost invisible under the thick layers of red paint smeared on it, chanting a mantra of some kind and holding smouldering incense sticks in his outstretched hands; on the steps round a *chai* shop men sit and chat away, their sticky glasses filled with sickly tea and their plates smeared with the remains of yet another dangerous-looking Indian snack; a shop-keeper squints through his half-moon glasses at his books by the light of a kerosene lamp, adding up figures in his head and writing down totals and stock levels with an old pen; and all the time the atmosphere of Varanasi, an indefinable feeling that permeates these ancient lanes, makes it all seem worthwhile and strangely seductive, despite the obvious squalor, smell and suffering. I challenge anybody to come to Varanasi and not be moved.

(Indeed my current travelling companion Chris, who was on his first visit to India in the capable hands of his friend, Martina, herself visiting India for her third time and Varanasi for the second, was totally bowled over by the place. He'd loved Darjeeling and had found Delhi pretty crazy, but Varanasi did it for him. He'll be back, no doubt about it: one month in India is never enough.)

As for what I actually did in Varanasi, well that's the funny thing. I did almost nothing, at least as far as

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traditional tourism goes. Varanasi is not a tourist haven in terms of specific sights, it's a tourist haven in terms of sitting and watching, and I did a lot of that. When I bade farewell to Chris and Martina on Sunday 17th, after we'd done a dawn boat ride together and just about got the hang of Varanasi's geography, I managed to change rooms to a stunning balcony location overlooking the *ghats*. From my basic but clean room (two mattresses on the floor, fan, light bulb and shelves) I could look out of a window each way onto the *ghats*, and my door opened out onto a semi-circular balcony from which I could see pretty much everything. I tried in vain to keep the local monkeys out of my bed[42], I spent whole days writing on my balcony and taking showers every two hours, I wandered up and down the *ghats* staring at the scenes before me, and I visited temples, mosques, forts and all the other buildings that appealed.

As if it were possible, one particular night managed to sum up Varanasi, even if it could have happened anywhere. Chris and I were sitting on the guest house roof watching the Ganges ripple past the *ghats*, and before we knew what was happening we heard a banging and a crashing from downstairs, and a whole

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[42] Noticing in the process that monkeys sit exactly like Indians, crouched down on flat feet (something westerners would also do if we used squat toilets). Luckily the monkeys ended up being interesting conversationalists, even if a little too temperamental and over keen to bare their teeth and lunge, so there was no repeat of Gunung Rinjani's unpleasantness.

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group of people stomped up the stairs to invade the roof. There were a few westerners and the rest were Indian, and as we sat there agog, they proceeded to practise their art, that of juggling fire. In the deep blue of night, the pale three-quarter moon rising over the river in front of us, we saw a lanky Frenchman juggling burning clubs; an Indian expert spinning a 6 ft pole with both ends lit, describing neon circles in the air; and an Australian girl creating Lissajoux patterns round her head and body with burning kerosene pads attached to the ends of two chains, one held in each hand. It was a meeting of cultures via the universal language of the circus, and the Indians and westerners chatted about tricks they'd learned, how much they had to practise and where they were next all meeting up for a show.

It seemed as if the circus down in the streets below had come up to the rooftop for the night. I sat amazed as the Varanasi sky burned around me, and in the morning realised that if I had to pick one place in India to recommend to people to visit, this would be it.

Death on the Platform

Written: 20 May 1998

The City of the Dead wasn't going to let me go easily. I had booked myself on the overnight train to Gwalior, an eight-hour journey across the dusty plains of gently

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sweating northern India, but when I turned up at the station, my train was nowhere to be seen.

When a train is late in the West, it's an event, and the announcer can't do enough to apologise and inform the passengers, for fear of recrimination from a bunch of furious commuters in angry suits. In India, however, the onus is on the passenger to work out what's going on: the electronic board that Varanasi Junction so proudly boasts was useless, proclaiming at first that the train was still leaving at 1310 (despite it being an hour later), and after a while unceremoniously dropping my train from its list.

So I spent the next few hours flitting between the Inquiry counter, the Assistance booth (the difference being that the latter is useless and simply refers you to the former) and the man with The Power, the Station Master. This fat bastard – those in charge of trains are always fat bastards in India, a reflection of their fat pay packets – had eight phones surrounding him on his cluttered desk, one of which was red and four of which had wind-up handles on their sides. I stood amazed as he dialled on one, picked up another, barked something down yet another, and finally realised that one of the receivers, which had been off the hook from the start, was the one he wanted. It took five minutes to unravel the spiralled cords, by which time he enlightened me with the words, 'Your train is late.' I couldn't thank him

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enough, the fuckwit.

Luckily I made friends with a couple of old Australian ladies who worked for the Tasmanian AIDS Council. They guarded my bags while I ran around trying to find the missing train, and when I eventually resigned myself to sitting under the speaker, hanging on every word the computerised announcer came out with (a technological innovation that is actually fairly useful), they proved to be excellent company.

‘Look, there’s a man asleep over there, right in the middle of the platform,’ said Connie, the elder of the two and the teller of tall tales from the African continent.

‘He’s probably dead,’ joked her companion, a veteran of Asian travel. ‘After all, it’s an auspicious place to die.’

‘I don’t think the Hindus reckon on dying in Varanasi Junction,’ I pointed out, and stood up to get yet another soft drink. On my way I passed the sleeping man and stared down at his oblivious face. It took me five seconds to notice he wasn’t breathing.

‘Is this man dead?’ I asked a well-groomed Muslim who was standing nearby, staring at the man with a look of resignation.

‘Yes,’ he replied, as if answering a question about the weather.

‘Probably waiting for the Gwalior train,’ I thought,

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and went for my drink.

His death surprised me: the man had only appeared there fifteen minutes before, just another person in Varanasi station lying down for a kip, and now he was stiffening up right by the Thums Up[43] stall. The top pocket of his shirt was stuffed with tickets and money, none of which was missing, and people were walking past without a blink. To all intents and purposes he was asleep, just permanently.

The status quo soon shifted when someone else noticed that he wasn't breathing. Gradually a small crowd started to appear, all conjecturing on the state of the man but not lifting a finger to do anything; I was fleetingly reminded of Nepalese highways, but unfairly, it turned out, as a contingent of railway men came and carried him away, bent fingers trailing through the thin layer of dust on the hot station floor, flies scattering in their wake.

When my train finally pulled in some five-and-a-half hours late, I considered myself lucky to have escaped Varanasi with my life. Even people not expecting it come to Varanasi to die.

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[43] One of my biggest worries about returning home isn't the job market or the drudgery of the lifestyle; it's the expense of soft drinks. Due to the searing heat I have developed quite an attachment to Coke, Mirinda, Thums Up and the rest of the gang, and I sure am gonna miss 'em. Of course the weather in England isn't quite as thirst-inducing as in India, but I've got a taste for fizz and it's going to be hard to resist. I'd better get a SodaStream…

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Air Coolers

Written: 22 May 1998

One of the delights of cheap Indian hotels is the availability of air coolers. Much more rudimentary and therefore much more cost-effective than freon-based air conditioning, air coolers are to room cooling systems what holes in the ground are to toilets: simple yet effective.

In its simplest form an air cooler is just a large box with a fan on the front face, which pulls air into the box through the other three vertical sides and pushes it out of the front. The bottom is filled with water that is pumped into the top to trickle down the three remaining vertical sides, which are normally covered in a twisted plastic matting material to give maximum surface area. It's simple: hot air is sucked into the box and passes through the trickling water, which cools it down. It works too.

The only disadvantages are the noise level (the air needs to be sucked pretty quickly to be cooled effectively) and an increase in humidity (the air blown out is pretty wet). But air-cooling has saved my life in this heat wave that's sweeping India, killing people with dehydration and sunstroke. It might be hot on the streets, but it's cool inside…

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Gwalior

Written: 23 May 1998

When other travellers find out that I'm planning to explore Rajasthan and Gujarat in June and July, there's a collective sucking in of breath. The reason? The heat.

Heat sounds OK on paper. 'It will be 41°C today,' reads the forecast and it's just a number, but the reality is something else. The heat in pre-monsoon India has to be felt to be believed.

My Gwalior-bound train finally pulled into town six hours late – not a bad effort by the driver, who managed to keep the train running at the right speed despite it being out of sync with the rest of India's huge timetable – but by the time it screeched to a halt the cabin was steaming. The seats were a burning sticky plastic, the metal struts supporting the berths were a searing and untouchable temperature, and the air was so stifling it was actually cooler to close the windows and prevent the hot country air from coming inside rather than suffer the furnace-like breeze. I made friends with a couple of young Indian blokes called Alok and Pavan[44] who

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[44] Which mean, in Hindi, Light and Air respectively. westerners naming their kids crazy names like Moon Unit Two (Frank Zappa's daughter) and Zowie Bowie (David Bowie's son), let alone the stupidity of Paula Yates and her kids' names, are regarded by the populace as having taken far too many drugs, and indeed, the children often change their names when they're old enough. India, on the other hand, is full of people called Moon, Mountain, Monsoon and so on; it's just that hardly anybody in he West speaks Hindi, so we don't notice. Yet again the

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helped me while away a journey made harder by a head cold and a slight temperature, and when I finally alighted I made straight for the nearest hotel, where I stood under the shower for a good half an hour.

The hotel turned out to be amazingly noisy but utterly redeemed by its position right over the local Indian Coffee House. In much the same way that McDonald's is a homely sight when you're stuck in the middle of a totally alien city, the Indian Coffee House is a guaranteed winner: their *masala dosas* have to be the best breakfast I've ever come across, and their coffee is so good I have to cram it all in before midday if I want any chance of a good night's sleep (I'm caffeine-sensitive). The traffic noise shook the walls of my room – which, incidentally, were almost too hot to touch, seeing as the temperature inside my room was 41°C, according to my thermometer – but I had earplugs and a full belly, so I survived.

Gwalior Fort

Gwalior's main attraction is its fortress, and what an attraction it is. Up there with Mandu, Bijapur and Golconda for beautiful Islamic atmospherics, Gwalior Fort dominates the town completely. Houses lie compressed at the foot of the steep 300 ft cliffs that make up the citadel: it's a little like a smaller Mandu

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Indians were ahead of the hippies by generations. Good for them.

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with a city at its feet. I struck out to explore the area early on the morning of Friday 22nd May.

The heat soon made itself quite unbearable, but I'd stocked up with plenty of water and wandered along the city streets sporting my bright magenta reflective umbrella. Gwalior is only a two-hour train ride from Agra (one of the most touristy places in India) but it might as well be on the moon for all the effect westernisation has had. It was all smiles and friendliness as I sweltered my way first to the locked southern gate (where I examined some Ellora-esque Jain carvings) and then to the long, winding road that leads to the northeast gate. Kids shouted out, 'Hello, how are you?' and ran up to shake my hand, men cracked into smiles when they saw me grinning like a cat, and even the women broke down a social barrier or two to say good morning. Hardly anybody maintained a stare, and if they did it was obviously because they were freaked out by the sight of a crazy white man heading off into the 40-degree-plus midday sun with nothing but a flimsy umbrella, a perfectly understandable reaction.

Reaching the fort after a long, hard ascent, I gratefully snuck into the airy spaces of the palaces and barracks still standing guard over the city (though the only soldiers you'll see these days are those on day trips from the nearby garrisons). The buildings on the fort don't all date from one period, but the ones I enjoyed

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the most were, predictably, from the Mughal period, with their Islamic designs and wonderful silhouettes. The biggest building, the Man Singh Palace, still had quite a bit of colour left on it, dashes of yellow and blue tiles that would have been quite magical when new: all that remains now are hints of mosaics, though one area obviously used to be plastered with yellow ducks on a blue background, more suited to a bathroom than a fortress.

I climbed up the crumbling stairs to the roof and seated myself in a lone pavilion, the perfect place for keeping watch on the plains below for the tell-tale sign of an invading dust plume; here the midday sun was directly above me, but with a stiff westerly breeze burning through the pavilion, it wasn't at all uncomfortable. I could see Gwalior town and the entire fort complex, as well as the striking white spires of a modern Sikh *gurdwara* (the name for a Sikh temple), the Konark-esque twin Hindu Sasbahu Temples (dating from the 9th to 11th centuries) and the *gopuram*-based Teli Ka Mandir. And then I walked round them all…

George of Gwalior

Suitably drained by my exploration of Gwalior's magnificent fortress, I decided to spend the afternoon indoors, preferably somewhere with air-conditioning or at least fans; the Jai Vilas Palace and Museum fitted the

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bill perfectly. The residence of the Maharaja of Gwalior – who still lives there, although he's converted most of his little shack into a museum – the palace is at once everything that was majestic about the Maharajas, and everything that was sickeningly decadent.

It's obvious from the first moment you arrive. The entrance fee is an extortionate Rs100, well over the price of any other entrance fee I'd had to pay in India, and on stepping inside it was obvious why: faced with the unearthly cost of maintaining such a huge palace without the usual income from bullying peasants and blackmailing politicians, the aristocracy of Gwalior was trying to bleed the public by legitimate means.

The Maharaja is a fat little man, as is the custom for rich Indians. Right from the first room there's an unmistakable air of Kipling and Empire about the place, and indeed, the first thing you notice is a big framed sign pinned on the wall listing the Maharaja's full name, titles and all. Known as George to his mates, his full title is His Highness Maharaja Mukhtar-ul-Mulk, Azim-ul-Iqtidar, Rafi-ush-Shan, Wala Shikoh, Mohtasham-i-Dauran, Umdat-ul-Umara, Maharajadhiraja Alijah Hisam-us-Saltanat, Honorary Lieutenant General Sir George Jiwaji Rao Scindia Bahadur Shrinath Mansur-i-Zaman, Fidwi-i-Hazrat Malik-i-Muazzam-i-Rafi-ud-Darjat-i-Inglistan GCIS Maharaja of Gwalior. Anyone with a name like this must be insane from birth, and the

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museum was to prove that not only is George insane, he's got impeccably bad taste.

The museum is divided up into a number of areas, each of them dealing with a particular subject. Some are large, reflecting a subject close to George's heart, and others are small, probably denoting a collection that George bought one drunken day after too many brandies and too much successful betting on the gee-gees. For example, the euphemistically named 'Natural History Museum' contains a selection of animals that George and his ancestors have killed over the years, including large numbers of tigers, rhinos, leopards, crocodiles, deer, ducks, mongooses (complete with snakes), buffalo, antelope, gazelles and, strangely enough, parrots. These are all stuffed and mounted in snapshot poses, the tigers looking mean and ready to pounce as if to underline George's bravery in facing up to the monsters. Littering the walls are pictures of George with various other fat, rich men (including an occasional sovereign of England) posing over prostrate carcasses and staring into the middle distance as people tended to do back in the days of primitive photography.

The rest of the museum follows similar lines. Some collections are so tacky you wonder who on earth would buy them, until you remember that George is an Indian: he obviously has a soft spot for awful watercolours with titles like 'Her first love letter' and 'Joyous spring'

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which celebrate a time of innocence and perfection in lovelorn Victorian England, and some of the furniture he has is simply beyond belief, such as the Italian cut-glass swing proudly gathering dust in a little-visited corner of his mansion. Rounding up the rest are the Arms Gallery, full of big swords and guns; the Archaeological Gallery, where George seems to have stashed half of India's Hindu stone carvings; the vehicles section, with its six litters and 14 carriages; rooms and rooms of furniture from various periods; the tapestry and rug section (which defined the term moth-eaten quite succinctly); an excellent collection of Mughal and Hindu miniature paintings; some rope from the construction of the Pyramids; a nondescript clothing section; a small and well-hidden room of erotic art, of which the only faintly erotic piece was a marble statue of a woman in cahoots with a swan; a room full of etchings from the Indian Mutiny which were exceptionally pro-British; a collection of old Urdu and Hindu manuscripts; some wonderful ivory carvings; some far-from-wonderful models of buildings; a Chinese gallery; and various other oddities too irrelevant to mention. To say that George's collection is eclectic is to state the obvious.

All this interested me, but the best was saved until last. At the far end of the mansion are two huge rooms, one above the other, that manage to encapsulate the pomposity of the aristocracy and serve to point out that

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as institutions get bloated to the point of self-parody, they must surely come tumbling down. The small part of me that had always wanted to go to Oxford thrilled at the sight; the rest of me wanted to puke.

The downstairs Banquet Hall is huge with three long tables disappearing off into the distance. Lining each side of the tables I counted 24 chairs, so each table seats some 48 people: with one more at each end that's 50 per table, giving 150 people per banquet. This isn't so unbelievable, unless you look at the splendour of each place, but what is beyond the pale is the train set that sits on the middle table. Looping round the perimeter of the tablecloth the train, a silver locomotive with 'SCANDIA' embossed on the side, pulls four cut-glass decanters of brandy and three cut-glass bowls of cigars, so if one wants a top up one simply has to wait for the next arrival… and unlike Indian Railways, the George Express always arrives on time.

As if this opulent isn't enough, the upstairs Durbar Hall, a huge lounge, is monstrous. The walls are white and gold with a massively arched ceiling (the gold paint used in this room is said to have weighed 58kg), and tables and chairs litter the floor like in a posh hotel foyer; but the eye is not drawn by this comfortable luxury, but by the two huge chandeliers filling up the empty spaces. Each chandelier is 12.5m high (41 feet), weighs 3.5 tonnes and carries 248 candles (or bulbs

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these days); when the room was constructed the engineers hung elephants from the hooks to check that they would take the weight of the chandeliers. Along with all the other lights in the room I estimated there must be some 750 candle holders in all, a nightmare for the poor bugger who was in charge of keeping them alight.

It all managed to make living out of a suitcase look particularly attractive, to be honest.

Political Pomp

As if this pomp and circumstance wasn't enough to make me feel like a downtrodden member of the proletariat, when I got back to my hotel there was a right royal ruckus going on in the railway station. A band was playing, fireworks were exploding and people were milling about, so I shot straight back out again for a look.

Arriving by train was a new government minister: the recently elected BJP government had just had a cabinet reshuffle, and one of the new faces was the MP from Gwalior, hence the jubilation. The old boy was coming home for a bit of a shindig.

I hung around, camera in hand, taking pictures of the band and the dancers, but when the locals saw me and my bush hat, they pulled me over and brought me right to the man himself. I didn't really know what to do

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– after all, I had no idea who this guy was, he could have been the bleeding Prime Minister for all I knew – so I snapped a couple of shots of him in the name of world peace, said thanks as he posed dutifully, and went off to try to discover who had just filled up two shots of my new film. Nobody at the hotel seemed to know, or care… 'Some kind of minister, I think,' was all I managed to get, but at least I can now say I've met a genuine Indian politician.

That night I'd arranged to meet Pavan, the friend I had made on the train. He rang to say he'd be a little late – not a surprise, this being India – so I lounged in the heat on my balcony, overlooking the fumes of east Gwalior. As I was dozing off (owing to a cough mixture I had bought that managed to knock me out cold, despite a total lack of warning on the bottle) I dreamed of flashing lights and loud, raucous music, and before you know it there it was, right in front of me: dancing, music, neon lights and a fat man on a horse with a servant holding an umbrella over his head. I blinked and rubbed my eyes, and sure enough I wasn't dreaming: a parade of glitzy noise pollution was celebrating its way along the road in front of my hotel, stopping every few yards to have a dance and wake up the neighbours. On their heads women carried strip-lights stuck in pots, Indian men danced their hip-swinging grooves to loud band music, and a group of beautifully turned-out

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women stood behind, coyly glancing around. People waved up to me and wanted me to join in, but luckily Pavan turned up to rescue me in time.

I thoroughly enjoyed myself in the vegetarian restaurant across the road. Pavan had brought his cousin Kamal and his friend Sham[45] and we spent the night exchanging cultural insights and religious concepts; being Jains, they were an interesting bunch, if only for their rules (strict vegetarianism, no garlic, no onions, no milk and so on; strict Jain priests even cover their mouths to prevent them swallowing insects). The meal ended and, as is the Indian way, we didn't sit around chatting; we went straight off on our separate ways. Sometimes, after a hard day, that's the best way of all.

Agra

Written: 25 May 1998

I prepared for Agra by clamming up and refusing to budge when the touts descended. In the event it was fine: the legendary hassle factor was obviously too lazy to brave the scorching temperatures.

Sure, the rickshaw man tried to charge me Rs30 to the hotel area when the price was fixed at Rs15 for all rickshaws (so I won that one), and I made sure he dropped me off at a different hotel to the one I'd

[45] That's Lotus and Black to you and me.

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actually chosen to avoid the commission scam, but that was it. No trouble. The shopkeepers all pleaded with me to visit their shops, and I flatly refused, but it wasn't that bad. Travelling in the off-season has its advantages, though I didn't realise they were lying in wait, waiting for me to drop my defences…

You'd never have believed it was the off-season, judging by the masses sprawling round the Taj Mahal. I arrived on a Saturday, so it was bound to be full, but even so it surprised me to see so many Indian tourists posing for photographs and wanting to include me too. I popped into the Taj for a quick look soon after I arrived, and only saw four other westerners, two of whom were friendly hippies and two of whom were so miserable and ugly that for a moment I couldn't believe that I had more in common with them than the Crazy Gang milling round us. But it takes more than Indian tourism and miserable palefaces to spoil something like the Taj.

The Taj Mahal. It's up there with the Pyramids, the Grand Canyon, the Eiffel Tower, the Sydney Opera House and the Houses of Parliament, but in one aspect it's so much more emotive than any of the others: it was built for love. The Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan built it in memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died in 1631 during childbirth; heartbroken, the Emperor commissioned the construction of a huge monument which took from 1631 to 1653 to build, requiring 20,000

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workers to create. The Emperor, who was later deposed by his son Aurangzeb and spent the rest of his life locked up in Agra Fort staring out at the Taj, is buried under the Taj, next to his beloved wife.

Even without such a tragi-romantic story behind it, the Taj would be perfect. Its symmetry is legendary, its white marble is brilliantly reflective and the intricacy of the work on the walls is incredible: everywhere you look the marble is inlaid with semi-precious stones, forming patterns of flowers and curlicues that offset the Arabic script arching over the entrances. Inside it is cool but surprisingly light, and the acoustics are not dissimilar to those of the Golcumbaz in Bijapur, though with the maelstrom of the crowds you're lucky to leave the mausoleum with your hearing intact, let alone able to detect echoes.

The Taj doesn't stand alone, either. The tourist mobs rush in at the southern end of the park, snap themselves posing with the Taj in the background, walk up the garden paths to the Taj itself, snap themselves looking serious in the throng gathered round the doorway, enter, clap, scream and yell, and then bugger off. Nobody bothers with the flanking buildings, which makes them rather pleasant.

On each side of the searing white Taj is a red sandstone mosque; these two are mirror images of each other, although only the left one is actually used as a

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mosque (the other faces the wrong way). Opposite the Taj's main entrance, at the other end of the long ornamental garden that features in everyone's photos, is the original entrance (through which you now exit), and lining the path between the two is a beautiful waterway in which you can see the Taj reflected, if it's not the dry season. All I got was brown leaves, but that was only to be expected at a time of year when droughts and heat waves are normal.

But when all is said and done, the Taj is the Taj and that's it. It's one of the most stunning buildings in the world, but I found myself more moved by the lonely tombs of Bijapur, or the far pavilions of Mandu, each of which sums up the stark beauty of the Mughal Empire better than the honeymoon sweetness of the Taj. Perhaps a lifetime's exposure to the image of the Taj Mahal manages to remove any surprise. Uluru turned out to be completely unlike its public image, but the Taj was exactly what I expected, to be honest; I expected it to be stunning, and stunning it was, but somehow that wasn't enough. The Taj had no mystery, and I vowed to go back again at dawn to see if a sunrise silence could recreate the atmosphere I'd found so powerful in the less well-known Islamic monuments.

Early Morning Taj Mahal

Well, it wasn't quite a silence, and the gates don't open

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until 6am, well after sunrise, but the difference was staggering. Almost exclusively peopled by white tourists, the noise level inside and around the marble walls was negligible: in fact, the noisiest people were the Indian guides, who seem to have mastered the nasal whines of the railway *chai* men in order to cut through the background noise of modern India. The westerners milling around were, in general, quiet and courteous, even if some of them did look like they forgotten to put their clothes on when they got up, and if only more of them had smiled I might even have liked them. Instead I wanted to shout, 'You're on holiday! Enjoy yourselves, you miserable buggers! *Smile!*'

But I kept quiet, and this enabled me to test out the acoustics inside the mausoleum. They are truly wonderful; whereas the Golcumbaz echoes your noises back to you ten times, the Taj just perpetuates the sound, not so much an echo as a reverberation. It goes on for seconds, turning a talking voice into a drone of feedback and the *muezzin*'s call into a marvel of tonal purity.

I found myself remembering an album that I had discovered in Chris' record collection back in Melbourne many moons ago; it was a recording made by a flute player who had managed, sometime in the late sixties, to get admitted into the Taj at night to make the album (obviously with judicious use of *baksheesh*, I see now). At the time the concept had sounded gloriously

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exotic and a wonderfully archetypal story from the flower-power era, but that morning it seemed much more real, if only because I could picture the sound of the flute echoing, now that there was peace under the domed ceiling.

The reason for the lack of early morning Indians and the resulting lack of noise is the entry-price policy. During the day the entry price is Rs15, an astounding deal to see one of the world's greatest monuments; but for an hour-and-a-half at dawn and a couple of hours at sunset the entry price soars to Rs105, a still not unreasonable amount but high enough to dissuade the masses (as was obvious when the price went down at 7.30am and crowds piled in, shattering the peace). The ethics of such a policy are debatable, but there's no doubt it very pleasant to be able to enjoy somewhat more of the atmosphere of the Taj than I'd been able to do on the previous day's Saturday scramble.

Indeed, I saw the policy of dissuasion in action. When I finally tracked down the ticket office through my insomniac muddle, there was a young Indian couple ahead of me, the man speaking loudly in a complaining voice. He obviously hadn't known there was a price difference, and was mouthing off to the ticket man in English about how you fuckers aren't getting my money that easily and it's disgusting what you fuckers have done – his English was pretty strong, especially in the

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vernacular. He refused to pay, and as he turned around to go he told me the news, ‘Don’t fall for this scam, it’s disgusting, they want 105 rupees before 7.30, then it’s 15, the fuckers.’ Grabbing behind him, he took a long swig from a half-empty 650ml beer bottle, breathed the fumes into my face and strolled off, dragging his empathetically complaining girlfriend with him.

I didn’t tell him that not only was I going to pay, I was glad to do so if it meant not having to share the Taj with him and his bottle: he was moaning about the cost of maybe two beers, and it was obvious that he wasn’t exactly poor. Sometimes the middle class in developing countries gives me the shits: places like China, Sri Lanka and Nepal charge you hundreds of rupees for every monument, whatever the time of day, and sometimes I wonder if rich Indians realise how lucky they are.

But how was the Taj, after all that? Infinitely better with fewer tourists (of course), but still not the earth-shattering experience that I had hoped; as with Uluru I had purposely kept my expectations low, but unlike Uluru the Taj was everything I had presumed it would be and no more. It is stunningly beautiful, ravaged by tourists, eminently photogenic and worth visiting at different times of the day; much like Uluru, it changes colour as the sun washes over the sky, and despite Agra’s appalling pollution, it is still radiant (though

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possibly not for much longer if the air quality doesn't improve drastically). As a monument to love it is unique, though its use as a photographic background for newlyweds is somewhat tacky.

It's just missing that little something… perhaps a sense of mystery, or the joy associated with discovering something that few others know about. I suppose that's the price you pay for having your photograph splashed across the front of fifty per cent of books about India.

Exploring the Rest of Agra

I had planned to spend a total of three days in Agra, but after a hot second day avoiding the touts and visiting the other main attraction apart from the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort (a 'must' according to my guidebook), I realised that Agra was no longer worthy of my patronage. The hassle from the local businessmen was driving me nuts, and India is full of places that are infinitely more interesting and infinitely more friendly.

Agra Fort is fairly disappointing in that it's more of a palace with fortress walls than a kosher fort, and that it's not high up but on the banks of the River Yamuna; my ideal fortress has great views and a barren beauty, but Agra Fort has neither. To be fair the most beautiful part of the fort, the Moti Masjid, isn't open to the public, but neither are the underground dungeons, fortress walls, northern buildings or any of the roofs. Add in

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crowds of jostling Indian tourists and it's only just worth the effort: I've seen much more impressive fortresses and much more beautiful palaces, and those without tourists too.

I will remember Agra Fort for one thing, though, and that's the gang of touts who hang around at the bridge to the entrance. Agra's hassle factor is definitely higher than normal, which isn't a surprise when you consider how much of a tourist attraction it is, but the difference isn't so much in the amount of attention, which is fairly universal, it's the way the touts operate. They're pathetic, truly pathetic, and they don't give up, even if it's blindingly obvious that you don't want that leather whip or wooden travel backgammon set. And in the off-season, when I visited, they're desperate, and it's almost embarrassing the way they beg you to buy from them.

In fact, when I capitulated and bought a bottle of water from one of the stalls, I handed over ten rupees – it was only eight rupees per bottle near my hotel – but the man wanted 12 rupees, which is actually the standard price for water. I'd been fired up by the touts though, and decided that I'd make him suffer instead, refusing to budge from ten rupees. My stubbornness earned me what the Indian thought was the ultimate insult, 'Are you Israeli?' referring to the Israelis' legendary bargaining aggression and stubbornness;

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realising he wasn't going to give in I immediately coughed up two more rupees and moved on to the next fool, aware that I was getting sucked in and warped by the touts' attitude.

On my way out of Agra Fort things got much worse. One particular tout simply wouldn't let go.

'Hey friend, you want marble box?'

'No.'

'Just twenty-five rupees.'

'No.'

'Beautiful inlay stones, lovely box, look.'

'No.'

'Okay, twenty rupees.'

'No.'

'Marble box, like Taj Mahal, see.'

'No.'

'It opens, look. Fifteen rupees.'

'No.'

'Just looking, friend.'

'No.'

'Fifteen rupees, very good price, how many you take?'

'No.'

'I have others too, but this one very cheap price. Ten rupees.'

'No.'

'Ten rupees, my final offer.'

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‘No.’

‘Ten rupees, please sir, please buy one box ten rupees only, please.’

‘No.’

‘Is very cheap, only ten rupees. Yes?’

‘No.’

‘Please baba…’

He only let me go because he was crushed out of the way by the woman selling leather whips (‘Leather? But you’re a Hindu!’ I said; ‘Very cheap,’ she said, ‘very good quality’) and the man with his bloody wooden travel backgammon set (‘I also have chess set, baba’). Then the rickshaw drivers closed in, and I managed to duck out of one corner and make off down the road, while a collection of drooling and rabid touts continued to hassle what was by now an empty space.

That afternoon I made plans to get out. I’d seen the Taj, done the fort and realised that if India has an ugly side, it’s Agra. If only they’d conducted their nuclear tests here, it would have saved us all a lot of hassle.

Leaving Agra

I escaped Agra on Monday 25th May, but only after another typical tout extravaganza. The standard rickshaw price from my hotel to the bus terminal should have been Rs15 but the rickshaw-*wallahs* were insisting on Rs30, and although the price difference was pathetic

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in real terms, I felt aggrieved enough by the whole Agra scene to stand my ground. I haggled mercilessly, and eventually got it down to Rs25, hardly a victory, but something at least.

But then I discovered I could get the standard rate of Rs15 if I stopped at a shop on the way where the rickshaw driver would get a commission. ‘I’m not buying anything, though,’ I said, ‘so you won’t get any money.’

‘Yes I will,’ said the rickshaw man. ‘I get 25 rupees for every tourist I bring, even if they buy nothing.’

‘OK then,’ I said, deciding to try to get one back on the touts. ‘We go to a shop and split the commission: ten rupees for me, 15 for you, so I get to go to the station for five rupees, don’t have to buy anything, and the only person who loses is the stupid shop who pays commission to rickshaw-*wallahs*. Deal?’

He was cagey, but he would have agreed if I’d pushed him; I however had only been winding him up and had no intention of hanging round in a shop pretending to be interested in cheap marble carvings and tacky carpets, so I ended up paying the Rs25 fee for an uninterrupted journey to the bus. It made me understand a bit more about why Agra is such a pit, though: it’s full of people who simply want your money.

I mentioned this to the rickshaw-*wallah*’s boss, who had joined me in the rickshaw. He’d asked me whether I

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liked Agra, and I told him precisely what I thought, and he sadly agreed. ‘We are not all bad,’ he said, and I said that, to be honest, the people I’d met away from the Taj and fort had been fine. But that wasn’t the point: the touts in those areas more than made up for the smiles of the rest of the population.

‘You will find the same in Jaipur,’ he said, referring to the capital of Rajasthan, where I would be heading in a few days. ‘They are very bad there too. Better you go to Gujarat, where the people are very friendly.’

I thanked him, got on the bus and whistled off to Fatehpur Sikri, an hour’s jostling bus ride away, where I was praying the touts would give it a rest. Some chance…

Fatehpur Sikri

Written: 26 May 1998

This popular day-trip spot between Agra and Jaipur is one of those strange places that Europe and the New World seem to lack: it’s a deserted city.

I had envisaged windswept desolation, an area of wonderful sunsets and ancient histories, a landscape of lonely citadels and cobwebbed mosques; but what I entered when I stepped off the bus was the Indian equivalent of an English seaside town in the winter, and like the English seaside in the winter, it looked like it

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was going to be a thoroughly depressing experience. I found myself wondering how the ruins were going to make up for the town around me, and I was more than a little concerned.

With the mercury touching the upper forties, tourists were staying away in their droves. This meant the desperation of Agra had infected the local guides, who were so eager to enlist my employment that they practically begged me for my money. I was hot, tired and unimpressed by both my hotel and the lame excuses for restaurants lining the streets, but eventually I tracked down a guide who spoke good English and who didn't seem too pushy: the only problem was that he didn't have a licence ('It's being renewed,' he claimed), but on his promise that he could still enter the complex because everyone knew he was an official guide I said I'd take him, but he wouldn't get one rupee if he wasn't the best bloody guide in Fatehpur Sikri. He said I wouldn't be disappointed. I said I'd better not be.

Of course, I was. There's a Chinese saying, 'We can always fool a foreigner,' and I began to suspect that the Indians in Fatehpur Sikri had adopted it too: he was lying about being able to get into the whole complex, he was lying about having ever been a guide, and he'd been lying about the amount of shade available in the ruins (a major reason why I'd waited until 4pm to set off exploring, when I could have easily gone in the midday

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sun and relaxed in the cool shadows). I was a bit pissed off: it's indicative of the awful nature of northern India's tourist traps that the man was blatantly lying and knew he would be found out, but still went on with the scam. He couldn't care less. I could: he'd wasted my precious time.

So I ditched him and gave him Rs20 for the tour he had given me of the Jama Masjid (the mosque part of the old city that is still in use, and is freely enterable by anyone), telling him when he wanted more that he was bloody lucky I'd given him anything, the lying toad.

Keeping my eyes dead ahead to make sure I didn't attract the unwanted attention of any other guides, I went off on my own into the real ruins, and that's when I realised that a guide was not only unnecessary, it was a downright disadvantage: old Fatehpur Sikri's beauty lies in its silences, its hidden nooks and crannies, its feeling of *Marie Celeste* desertion. It has to be one of the most incredible sights I have ever witnessed.

Fatehpur Sikri was, when it was built, the capital of the Mughal Empire. The Emperor Akbar started construction in 1569; he was childless and, having tried all sorts of solutions to his plight, he ended up visiting a Sufi saint, Sheikh Salim Chishti, for help. Soon a son was born and, impressed and overjoyed, he started building on the site where he had met the saint. Fatehpur Sikri became the capital of Mughal India between 1570

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and 1585.

But things didn't work out and, owing to a serious problem with the city's water supply, the Mughals simply left Fatehpur Sikri after just 15 years and moved to Agra, where they built the fort and later the Taj Mahal. Meanwhile Fatehpur Sikri stood untouched, a complete mediaeval city of red sandstone, pretty much uninhabited.

It's simply marvellous. Fortresses are one thing, but Fatehpur Sikri has everything from huge central squares, to exquisitely carved multi-tiered pavilions, to precise gardens, and everything is still immaculate. Wandering round the city with hardly another person in sight felt like being shrunk and placed in an architectural model: there was no litter, no pollution, no animal life, no people and no hassle. The trees were perfect and regularly positioned; the buildings had divine symmetry; birds flocked from spire to spire, outlined against the pale blue sky; high-domed ceilings covered cool terraces, overlooking the decidedly Roman central forum; and throughout it all I could picture the inhabitants living their everyday lives. I couldn't get enough: having marvelled at the Islamic brilliance of various defensive structures throughout the realm, I was finally exploring the place where the architects lived. I could have lived there myself.

Though as I watched the sun setting over the forum

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I was rudely reminded of where I was: not the reserved Middle East or strict Pakistan, but India. I spent the dying embers taking photos for an Indian man and his mother as they posed with typical solemnity in front of the various buildings. I couldn't refuse, but I couldn't help thinking that even in this show of politeness, I was being used. If anything sums up northern India, it's that feeling.

(Though the locals of Fatehpur redeemed themselves later that night when I came across a group of them gathered round a camel. It had fallen down a sloping ditch and couldn't get up, and they were trying to push it out. They enlisted my help, thoroughly entrancing me with their friendliness and willingness to incorporate a total foreigner into the carnival event of shifting a braying camel onto the road. It almost made me feel guilty about criticising the people of northern India, but not quite. I still found myself preferring the southerners…)

Service Station Hell

Written: 26 May 1998

To get anything resembling a decent meal in depressing off-season Fatehpur Sikri I had to walk some three kilometres out of town, beyond the old city walls. It wasn't long before I found myself in the bowels of hell.

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Indian service stations – for that is where I found the restaurant – are utterly demonic. Of course, ‘service station’ is a western term and is purely euphemistic when applied to India: there’s lots of servicing going on, but precious little station. Lining the dirty streets are garish Indian TATA trucks (the TATA company is India’s biggest local manufacturer of vehicles, among other things), painted with Sivas and *lingams* and beautiful country scenes that scarcely bear any relevance to the heaving rust buckets they adorn: perhaps the scenes are there to remind the driver precisely what it is his truck is systematically destroying. These trucks aren’t as big as western lorries, but their sheer numbers make up for their lack of size and besides, the Indians manage to pack so much into them that they probably manage to carry as much as Australian road trains.

In an Indian service station the concept of a ramp for servicing vehicles is totally alien. Trucks with missing wheels are propped up on piles of stones; sump oil is drained onto the street where it collects in black, dangerous-looking puddles that even the cows won’t drink; engines are tested regularly, revved up to high speeds while they churn big clouds of noxious fumes out into the street (Indian trucks have their exhaust pipes out of the side, so if one passes you while you’re walking, prepare for black trousers); meanwhile truckers manage to catch some sleep in their cramped cabs, somehow

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managing to ignore the hellish clanging going on all around. It's a 24-hour event, too, and at night the whole scene, only lit by headlights and the occasional fire, takes on an unearthly air as men walking in front of headlights cast huge shadows in the fume-filled air.

I walked the gauntlet and, to my amazement, found the restaurant I was looking for to be very good. Sure, the power died every five minutes and the beer wasn't cold, but the food was excellent. But as I walked back, the beer pleasantly numbing my senses, I vowed to leave early in the morning and to never come back. Old Fatehpur Sikri was paradise; new Fatehpur Sikri was hell.

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Rajasthan

Jaipur

Written: 28 May 1998

After a journey from Fatehpur Sikri that is best forgotten, I arrived in Jaipur on Tuesday 26th May. Jaipur has a bad reputation for its rickshaw mafia, who will refuse to take you anywhere unless there's a commission involved, but I managed to avoid this by getting dropped off at the main post office, ignoring the driver's hotel recommendations and finding my own place.

I spent the rest of the day relaxing in the grounds of my hotel, the Evergreen. Overwhelmingly western in its clientele, the Evergreen seemed to be a collecting point for all the weirdoes and freaks of the Rajasthan trail: dirty dreadlocks mingled with tattoos on bodies covered only by flimsy sarongs; ears displayed more rings than Saturn; and the talk round the breakfast table was of last night's acid binge and how fucked up everyone was before they went to bed (and this below the sign declaring that drugs were not tolerated). It wasn't threatening, but it was a bit of a surprise to see such a large collection of alternative lifestylers in one place; it felt a little like Glastonbury, but without the dogs on

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string.

Having evacuated my unwell intestines as far as possible, I decided to tackle Jaipur. Fully aware that it is unfair to criticise a city when you're feeling under the weather (which was itself a major concern, the heat wave continuing unabated) I went in with an open mind, and didn't find it as bad as I had imagined. But then again I hardly left myself open for the average con man.

The Sights of Jaipur

Jaipur is a shopper's paradise, which rules me out: given the choice between shopping for souvenirs and watching paint dry, I'd go for the paint because it's less tiring. But that's where Jaipur's main tout scene hangs out, enticing tourists into carpet emporiums, jewellery shops and clothes stalls, and I simply clammed up whenever anybody mentioned buying anything. I also avoided the rickshaws and walked everywhere, mainly for the practical reason that a jittery ride in a three-wheel nightmare would have stirred up a tender colon that didn't need any excitement, so I found Jaipur not unpleasant as far as the legendary touts went.

It still wasn't the most pleasant place to be, but the sights were worth stopping off for, seeing as Jaipur was *en route* south: I wouldn't go out of my way for them, though. Top of the heap was the Jantar Mantar, an odd collection of huge astronomical instruments built in

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stone by the founder of Jaipur, Maharaja Swai Jai Singh, from 1728 onwards. It's reminiscent of those wonderful paintings of the masters of early astronomy, with their huge sundials and large azimuth-measuring machines, and despite the intense heat it conjured up plenty of night-sky images. Without some kind of guide it appears as some sort of huge children's playground – there's a 90 ft sundial dominating the proceedings that looks for all the world like a giant slide – so I bought a book from a local drinks stand and set off to explore.

The book proved interesting in its own right: the standard of its grammar and spelling was nothing short of appalling, and served to confuse the hell out of me despite my fairly sound grounding in basic astrophysics. The preface read as follows (with all spellings faithfully reproduced):

> *From long gack there is no book which can help to the tourists to understand Astronomical Instruments there self, by help of this book. One can see and understand every thing (all the instruments).*

Intrigued, I read on, trying to understand the basic definitions given in the text, such as:

> *Equinox: The bigger circle of the ecliptic interects*

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the bigger circle of the celestial equartor.

I was learning new and strange terms by the dozen: ‘heavely bodies’ rotated round the ‘glob’, and one instrument was useful ‘to find out the aware of the fact that, the Jaipur time is observed solar system’. I thoroughly enjoyed trying to piece together any sense from Ashok Choudhary’s epic guidebook (‘He knows English French & German languages’, according to the preface) and hoped I could pick up some of his other tomes; I idly wondered whether he’d had anything to do with the planetarium in Hyderabad…

Next to the Jantar Mantar was the City Palace and Museum, entry charge Rs70 plus Rs50 for a camera, but despite this extortion, it was nothing on George’s collection. Palace guards wittered on about irrelevancies and demanded *baksheesh*, underemployed boutique owners tried to sell me carpets and trinkets, and the only display which caught my eye was a collection of ancient astronomical books written in the scratchy Arabic script associated with Islam; but it was all right, and like every other Indian museum I have ever visited, it at least provided a place for the staff to sleep. In the corner was a man snoring gently into his cupped elbow; in yet another room a man in white kurta pyjamas nodded off on his plastic chair; even those who were animated enough to punch my ticket looked like they were

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fighting a losing battle with drooping eyelids. The entry fee doesn't seem to sting so much when you consider that you're providing a useful social service for tired museum attendants.

I rounded off my wanderings with a visit to the Hawa Mahal, the Palace of the Winds, a classic piece of flamboyant Rajasthani architecture that looks over the main street of the old city. This garishly pink five-storey facade, from where ladies of the court used to watch the world go by, is typical of Jaipur; the old city is known as the Pink City because most of the buildings are painted pink, an unusual choice of decor and one that I found particularly tasteless. The guidebooks rave about how beautifully the pink catches the sunset, but to me it looked tacky, sugar-coated and dirty in the way that only a rushed cover-up paint job can.

Street Encounter

Wandering back through the pink streets I stopped to watch a demonstration by the Bank Workers' Union, whose members obviously put far more effort into their rallies than they ever do behind the counter, and that's when I fell into conversation with a local student… or that's what he told me he was. His second question after he'd ascertained my citizenship status was more of an indication of the state of play in Jaipur than anything I'd yet encountered. It was verging on the paranoid.

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‘Tell me,’ he said. ‘Why is it that most tourists I see here don’t want to talk to Indians?’

Ah! I thought: so the tourists are biting back, are they? I decided to be candid.

‘Because most of the people your average tourist meets here are liars, commission merchants or simply after your money,’ I said. ‘And a lot of them pretend to be students,’ I added, purposely goading him to see what the response would be. His brow darkened.

‘So you lump me together with those people, do you?’ he said. ‘I am a student: how else would I be able to speak English?’

‘Are you telling me that only students can speak English here?’ I said. ‘What about all those bloody rickshaw drivers who take you off into the middle of nowhere only to dump you at a shop that’s miles from your destination? That’s the first thing a lot of tourists get to see in Jaipur, and it makes them trust nobody.’

‘The rickshaw drivers are uneducated,’ he said. ‘They get one tourist who gives them US$100 for a ride, and they realise it’s good money to keep doing it. But why does that mean you don’t trust me?’

‘Why should I?’ I said. ‘If I come across five people who try to rip me off, of course I’m going to be cagey about the sixth. What can you expect? A small minority are ruining the whole tourist thing for the lot of you.’

‘But why should tourists be rude? We are not all

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alike.’

‘Listen, buddy, I can go to almost any city in India and meet wonderful people who are genuine. Why should I bother to open myself to the touts in Jaipur? I’m not short of friendly Indians to talk to, you know. The country’s full of them, but Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, Jaipur… you can keep it.’

‘But you still don’t believe me. I have no shop; I work in the telephone booth here, I see many tourists, but they don’t trust me.’

‘Well, blame it on your city. It’s not my fault. And I thought you said you were a student, not a telephone booth operator…’

And off he stomped, looking pretty pissed off. He had been getting quite angry as if he was blaming me for the tourist attitude here, but what could I say? Jaipur deserves its fate, if you ask me: maybe the legitimate operators will do something about it, but I doubt it. Like the man said, tourists who give US$100 for a rickshaw ride really screw it up for everyone, locals and tourists alike.

The weirdness continued as I returned to the Evergreen. Poked under my door was a photocopied leaflet proclaiming that the world was being prevented from entering the New Age of Human Harmony by the Dark Forces who were installing mind control devices throughout the world in the form of televisions,

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microwaves, computers and newspapers. For some reason this piece of well-articulated rubbish fitted in with Jaipur's atmosphere of paranoia: I was paranoid of every movement in my belly, the people of the city were paranoid about the tourist attitude, and the tourists were paranoid of the Dark Forces.

I decided to leave as soon as I could. The feeling was getting infectious…

The Heat Wave

At this point it's worth mentioning the heat wave. Unseasonable and unwelcome, it had by May 27th claimed 136 lives, 86 of which were in Rajasthan. The highest temperature recorded in the country was 49.5°C, Delhi had its hottest May day on record, and when I'd passed through Bharatpur on the way from Fatehpur Sikri to Jaipur, the mercury had been hovering at 49°C (120°F).

According to the paper (which also carried news of India's first ever sex-change operation and a severe shortage of beer in Delhi) it wasn't just the northwest suffering: Orissa was sweltering in temperatures of 48°C, and Chennai was up to 43°C, some seven degrees above normal. Coupled with the humidity down south, it must have been unbearable: at least Rajasthan's heat was dry. (I was to read a week later of 400 heat-related deaths in Orissa alone, 100 of those in one day.)

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Is it any wonder people were going off their rockers? It sounded like the Dark Forces and their microwave brain scanners were starting to win…

It was enough to make me hit the trail for Pushkar, despite the state of my intestines.

Pushkar

Written: 2 June 1998

Being ill is miserable at the best of times, but being ill on your own in a foreign country when the temperature's pushing fifty is nightmarish. I decided I had to get out of Jaipur, despite a downturn in my condition, so I clenched my way down to Pushkar.

When you are well there is nothing quite as interesting as arriving in a new place; when you are ill there is nothing quite as depressing. My bus dropped me off in Ajmer, where I took a rickshaw across town to the bus to Pushkar. I didn't bother to squabble with the rickshaw driver over his extortionate price of Rs20, and I told him to stop going on about taking his buggy all the way to Pushkar for Rs250, because I was taking the Rs5 bus, thank you very much. On arrival at Pushkar I told the waiting touts to get lost and headed for a hotel I had been recommended, only 100m from the bus stand. ('It's at least a kilometre,' said one boy with a push cart offering me a lift; I told him to get lost too. Illness can

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make you brutal.)

Here I shut myself up in my single room (complete with air cooler, a good enough reason on its own to justify the journey south) and alternately ran to the toilet, drank rehydration salts and drifted off into disturbed waking dreams, my incredibly sore throat waking me up whenever the swallowing reflex occurred in my slumber. I abandoned all my plans, started a course of antibiotics and lay down to wait for an improvement. With serious diarrhoea that's the only way: drink loads, squirt loads and do your time. I saw my carefully crafted plans of exploring Gujarat evaporating in smoke, but I didn't care: in this state, all you want to do is stay put.

Luckily I had lots of books, even though one of the side effects of my illness was an inability to focus my left eye. This might have been the cough mixture – I had a mild bout of flu to coincide with my diarrhoea – which the man in the chemist had insisted wouldn't make me drowsy, but which patently did. I was hungry, but alive: when I lay on my back, my stomach curved inwards towards my spine, reminding me with unnecessary clarity of TV pictures of Ethiopia.

I thought of the Bada Valley, I thought of Rantepao, I thought of Singapore, I thought of Puri, I thought of Hampi, I thought of the Bhopal-Gorakhpur train, I thought of Annapurna, and I thought that if all else

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failed I could write a book called *Colourful places in which to be ill*. But as per usual it was simply a matter of willpower: I didn't have a temperature so it wasn't malaria, and from past experience I knew I'd be all right before a few days had disappeared. I just had to shit it out.

Lazing in Pushkar

My hotel at Pushkar, the Peacock, was quite beautiful. The rather pleasant rooms were centred round a courtyard containing a garden and a swimming pool (complete with water slide), and the black tea and plain toast provided me with ample rejuvenation without me having to move more than ten feet from my room and its adjoining ablutions. I read Theroux, Forster and Stephen Hawking (my left eye having sorted itself out); I wore shorts and bare torso without feeling rude; and I vowed to do nothing until my strength was up.

All the local energy was taken up by the hotel's population of black-faced monkeys. Bigger than any monkeys I had seen so far, the Peacock's resident troupe were notable not so much for their mischievous shenanigans as for their effect on the staff. Monkeys would run across the lawn and up a tree, knocking something over in the process, and the staff would rush out from their habitual slumber and start to shout short sharp admonitions into the branches. The monkeys

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would take not a blind bit of notice, and after a couple of minutes it was hard to tell who were the monkeys and who the humans: certainly the staff managed to make as much noise as the simian pests, if not more.

This is a classic Indian attitude. Where the Chinese simply eat everything that moves and people like George shoot and stuff them, the typical Indian either kills them for money (witness the failure of the Project Tiger protection scheme which, through corruption and poaching, has actually seen a drop in tiger population in India's National Parks) or taunts them. In Darjeeling the director of the snow leopard sanctuary, a division of the zoo there, said it was a conscious decision to make the snow leopard and red panda enclosures a separate area from the zoo with a separate entrance, because the treatment of the animals in the main zoo by Indian visitors would be completely destructive to the sanctuary's aims. He didn't hold back: he said Indians weren't welcome in the snow leopard sanctuary, and that in general Indian attitudes towards animals were terrible. Not surprisingly it is a male problem, there being some kind of bravado involved in taunting animals; women rarely get involved, and children simply follow their parents. Indian zoos really are the pits.

But in the Peacock the monkeys always won, and the staff would give up their grunting and go back to

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their siesta: what can you do about an animal that can climb a tree faster than a man can run? At least it meant the monkeys weren't vicious, for which I was grateful after the Rinjani experience.

The hotel was almost empty (a common occurrence in this, the off-season hit by ridiculous temperatures) and the only other people in the hotel were three couples; one couple (from northern England) sat in their own spot and eyed any other visitors suspiciously when they thought nobody was looking, and the other two failed to materialise for quite a while (because they were also ill, I was to discover later). Normally this would have made me lonely or bold, but for once I was grateful for the solitude: I sat in splendid isolation, enjoying the feeling of strength ebbing back into my body. I didn't feel good, but I felt improved, and sometimes that's better.

While I lounged a thin, wiry man planted grass cuttings in the sandy lawn, worn bare by the heat and the effect of people. His spine was a series of knots, sitting prone on his back like nodules on a baby dinosaur, and he slowly and methodically dug small troughs in the sand with a sharp metal instrument, putting in lines of grass before covering them up again. It was hot where he worked, but he hardly sweated at all, something I had noticed among the Indians during this heat wave: while I swam in my own juices, the

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locals managed no more than a faint film of perspiration (unless they were fat and middle class, in which case they sweated just like westerners). My clothes got tidemarks while the locals shone in their garish colours and beautiful sarees; I suppose that acclimatisation is unavoidable when you're born into this kind of environment, but I still marvelled at their resilience.

On my second day I met the two more sociable couples in the hotel – Michael and Rachel from New Zealand, and Mark and Philippa from England – and swapped tales of illnesses. This gave us common ground and, still failing to meet the gaze of the third mysterious couple, we spent afternoons round the pool, sipping Coke and rehydration salts and swapping travellers' tales.

Pushkar is a classic travellers' destination. It has *ghats* around a holy lake[46], restaurants, shops, pilgrims, cows and, in the heat wave, precious little activity or toutish behaviour. People were pretty friendly, and they were certainly colourful: it was a perfect place to unwind. Strict rules cover the city and especially the *ghats*: Pushkar is totally vegetarian and alcohol-free, even to the extent of banning eggs, and nefarious activities like wearing shoes, showing affection and

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[46] Complete with a large LED screen welcoming you to 'HOLEY PUSHKAR' and warning you not to 'WASH CLOTH, USE SOAP OR GARGLE IN THE LAKE'.

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baring your torso are strictly forbidden within 30 feet of the lake. This is hardly a drawback, though, as the main activity in Pushkar during the hot season centres around the hotels and their swimming pools, where wearing skimpy bikinis or brief shorts is tolerated and provides a surprising shock to the traveller who hasn't seen a bare thigh for weeks.

While in Pushkar I did nothing of merit except eat, sleep, celebrate the return of my appetite and drop bits from my plans. I had hoped to explore more of Gujarat, the state to the south of Rajasthan, but I realised that time was running out, and if I wanted to visit the Himalayas again, I was going to have to rush it if I wanted to see everything I'd originally included on my list. In this heat, rushing was evidently bad for the health, so I pruned my original plan to leave in just the places I really wanted to see, and left it at that. It felt much more pleasant not to be careering round like an American in Paris: I felt I could allow myself to relax.

This sounds a little dictatorial when written down, but it's the way I travel. I'm quite hard on myself because I want to see lots of things, experience lots of different environments and be stimulated constantly. The other side of the coin is to settle down somewhere for a few weeks and to really get into local life, and this has its advantages too; I've found, though, that this sort of semi-settling is much better if you have a companion,

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someone to share everyday life with and someone to provide conversation and justification for staying put. On your own it can simply be lonely, a state which constant movement and stimulation preclude: perhaps that's why I have seen so much and find it hard to kick back on the beach.

In fact, illness and apathy are the only things that slow me down, one being a physical limitation and the other a mental one. And as my physical limitation faded in Pushkar, so grew my desire to continue exploring. So eventually I did.

Udaipur

Written: 5 June 1998

Udaipur is known for its beautiful lake, its intricate palaces and its holy Hindu temples, but on arrival you could be forgiven for thinking that the locals have dumped all their chivalrous Rajput history in favour of that more modern example of suave sophistication, James Bond. Restaurants advertise video screens showing Bond movies, guidebooks allude to 007 in their descriptions, and travellers distinguish it from other palatial Rajasthani cities by the city's new creed: it's where *Octopussy* was filmed.

This of course has little bearing on the real Udaipur experience. Dragging bags from an overnight bus into

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the twilight of 5am Udaipur I felt shaken but not stirred, and when the rickshaw drivers appeared I wished I had a licence to kill, but that was all. For only the second time on this trip I had resorted to sleeping pills, and the Valium I'd bought had certainly done the trick, knocking me out for the entire drive down from Pushkar; unfortunately I was still in a drug-induced idiocy on arrival, and I blindly and gratefully followed an English couple I'd met on the bus to a hotel where I managed to sleep off the effects of the pills.

I was impressed by the power and effectiveness of the drug, but I couldn't help reflecting that some people take this stuff every night in order to sleep; drug addiction might invoke images of needles and spoons, but it frightens me more to think of the countless millions on Valium, Prozac, cough medicine and all the other prescribed drugs we collectively pop down our throats in the name of good health.

Having shaken off my chemical slumber I soon realised that Udaipur is yet another beautiful Rajasthani city. Dominating the city is the ornate City Palace, and placid Lake Pichola contains two little islands: Jagmandir with its perfect domed edifice and Jagniwas with its far from ancient Lake Palace Hotel, one of the most luxurious and romantic hotels in India. The old city is hemmed in by an ancient fortified wall, and when the sun sets and the lights flicker on in the various

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palaces, it's a scene of picturesque perfection.

The City Palace

Below the surface of this grandeur things aren't always quite so beautiful, though. Take the City Palace: the current Maharana (as he's referred to) still lives in one portion, which is closed to the public; two other areas have been turned into luxury hotels, so although they're open to the likes of you and me, it's only with the accompanying guilt-jealousy crossover that five-star hotels bring out in those unwilling or unable to fork out such riches; and the remainder makes up the museum.

One can only assume, though, that the latter is the least impressive quarter: from the outside it looks like it should be one of the most interesting palace experiences in India, but it's not. The past masters of Udaipur obviously had excellent taste in exterior architecture – cupolas, wonderful carved towers, marble arches and so on – but incredibly sad taste in interior design. Back in Gwalior George managed to demonstrate one side of the Indian aristocracy with his collection of frivolous idiocies, massively grandiose gestures and impressive works of art. The City Palace, however, shows another side to the aristocracy, one verging on *nouveau riche* (in taste rather than actuality). If George and his ancestors were to build their palaces in the modern age, they would be inventive and modernist in the way that the

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Louvre pyramids are; if the Maharanas of Udaipur were to do the same, they would be into shag-pile carpets and flock wallpaper.

The interior design feature that sums up the Maharanas of Udaipur is the mirrored room, and there are plenty of variations on this theme in the City Palace. Without exception they are hideous beyond measure, the architectural equivalent of shell suits. These days the mirrors are starting to go black at the corners, an inevitable consequence of humidity and a lack of maintenance, but even in their heyday they would have been tackier than the inside of a cheapskate fortune teller's tent. As if to rub in the repugnance of the rooms, a number of the connecting corridors have marble floors and white tiled walls, bringing nothing to mind so much as a public toilet. I couldn't believe that inside this beautiful building was such a display of appalling taste as this, and despite a few pleasant respites from this psychedelic disaster zone (such as the swimming room with wonderful views over the lake through its latticed walls) I left the palace with spots in front of my eyes and a strange desire to stare at a whitewashed wall for hours.

Luckily the streets of Udaipur are a good antidote. They're the usual pilgrim town fare, with small winding trails leading down to weed-choked lake views, and hotels and restaurants crammed into every corner, each

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of them claiming that they are recommended by the *Lonely Planet* and mentioning, in passing, that they show *Octopussy* twice a day. In the peak season I can imagine central Udaipur being an absolute hellhole of white faces and people who find garish mirrored rooms tasteful, but when I was there it was dead, and much the better for it. The touts were non-existent, the streets more natural, the effect of tourism numbed by the heat. I liked Udaipur, even if its rulers managed to offend my sense of the aesthetic.

The Monsoon Palace

In Udaipur my umbrella caused a sensation. I'd had plenty of reactions before – mainly ones of open-mouthed amazement at the sight of a maroon umbrella of almost Indian garishness adorning a foreigner – but I'd never experienced jealousy before. In Udaipur the locals wanted to examine my umbrella, to understand how the silvering worked in keeping the heat of the sun off me, and eventually they wanted to buy it: I had offers of three hundred, four hundred rupees, far more than I'd paid for it in Calcutta. I wondered if they didn't have umbrellas in Udaipur, a strange concept seeing as the monsoon lasts for three months in these parts.

That's why on the horizon there's a huge ancient palace topping a mountain range: where the Lake Palace was the Maharana's winter abode, the Monsoon Palace

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was his summer hideout, commanding as it does amazing views of his domain. I fancied a stroll and set off on the morning of Thursday 4th June to conquer the peak.

It was a bloody long way in the ridiculous heat of an Indian summer: five kilometres to the base of the hill and then a long series of switch-backs to the palace perched on the top. On the flat stretch of road between Udaipur and the hill I was hailed from a rickshaw and offered a free lift to just below the base of the mountain, and fully aware that this would involve some kind of sales scam, I hopped in, savouring the challenge; and indeed, my fellow passengers turned out to be art students who worked for a cooperative on the outskirts of town and which just happened to be on the road to the Monsoon Palace. I smiled sweetly, admired their pleasant work (mainly miniature paintings on silk and marble), feigned a vague interest and told them that I'd think about it on my long walk uphill and, if I wanted to buy anything, I'd pop back in on my way down. I knew this was simply procrastination and so did they, but it did mean I had to think quickly if I was to avoid the hard sell on the way back to town.

All thoughts of miniature paintings were soon banished by the desolation of the landscape. Udaipur is beautifully perched amid its lakes, but outside this watery zone the scenery is arid and uninviting. I loved

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it: craggy hills burned in the sun, occasional trees bent crooked by the sun provided scant shade by the roadside, and tiny mud brick huts clubbed together in settlements that must have been unbearably hot. And as the heat haze shimmered above the scrubby bushes dotted on the sand, the Monsoon Palace sat above it all, elegant and strangely out of place in this desert environment.

When I finally arrived at the top I found the large green doors firmly bolted shut. This was not what I had expected: it was supposed to be open to the public, and bolted green doors are a bit of an impediment as far as exploration is concerned, but after walking for an hour and a half you grow bold, and I decided to investigate. I raised the big iron ring on the door and hammered for a bit, convinced I could hear voices inside, and sure enough after a bit a doddering old man creaked open the bolts and peered out.

‘Can I come in?’ I inquired in my best sycophantic voice, the one usually reserved for train reservation officers.

‘No,’ he said.

‘But I’ve just walked all the way from Udaipur, and it’s really hot,’ I whinged, screwing up my eyes in a pathetic attempt to look tired.

‘You’ve just walked from Udaipur?’ he said in the same way one might say, ‘You seriously *like* this

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music?’

‘OK,’ he continued, ‘you rest here for a minute, I’ll be back.’

Half an hour later I was still resting – I wasn’t going anywhere, after all – when the door opened and two flashy youths came out. They were obviously tourists, and I asked them if they’d been allowed inside.

‘Yes,’ said one of them. ‘It cost us twenty bucks.’

‘Twenty bucks?’ I cried. ‘You’re kidding!’

‘Nope,’ he said. ‘Twenty whole rupees. It’s nice, though.’

‘Oh, rupees?’ I said. ‘Shit, I thought you meant dollars…’

He just smiled. ‘No, twenty rupees. Bucks, rupees, same same.’

This was the first time I’d come across this particular Americanism, and it was odd. In their designer shades and western gear these two guys were obviously rich Indian tourists, but to call their currency ‘bucks’ seemed a little over the top. Whatever, the door was still open and another Indian was standing there about to close up, so I asked him how much to come inside. He looked me up and down and said, ‘Ten rupees. You get only half an hour, then you leave.’

‘That’s fine by me,’ I said, paid up and entered.

The Monsoon Palace is now owned by the government, and it shows. Originally a stunningly

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picturesque piece of hilltop architecture it's now inhabited by more birds than humans, with the distinctive chalky smell of bird shit pervading every room and corridor. Plaster is peeling off the walls, remnants of coloured glass windows hint at its former Rajasthani glory, but in the end it's just somewhere for the TV companies to stick their aerials, and the roof, from where the views of the desolate landscape are beautiful, is an eyesore of antennae supported by steel hawsers thoughtlessly cemented into the walls. One wall proclaimed, 'Navendra loves Anila,' and another said, 'I love you Ankita,' and all the while the hot desert breeze ruffled through the open windows, blowing piles of old bird's nests into the corners and flecking the paint off onto the floor. It was faintly depressing: from below the place looked famously grand, but from inside it was obviously just a shell.

I didn't need my full half an hour, and I soon left to start the long walk down. It wasn't long before I was sweating freely, and even under my maroon umbrella things were getting hot, but that's when India saved the day yet again. Swooping down the road from the palace came two sparklingly clean white Ambassadors[47], and as they approached me the first one slowed down. The windows were blacked out so I couldn't see a thing, but

[47] The Ambassador is the most common car in India, and it's as distinctive as a London cab.

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the heat played havoc with my imagination: I envisaged the rear window smoothly sliding down to reveal a beautiful blonde Texan model complete with champagne on ice and an afternoon to kill, but nothing happened. I couldn't see in and no windows slid down. It was a stand off, and I didn't quite know what to think.

But the windscreen wasn't blackened, so I poked my head over the bonnet and saw the Indian chauffeur gesturing me to the side door, and nodding vigorously I followed his orders: the door popped open, cold air rushed out and shocked my dripping cheeks and the two occupants in the rear seat squashed up to make room for me. In the lottery of life I'd scored another winner.

My kind saviours were three middle-aged men, dressed up in spotless white kurta pyjamas and looking like terribly important people. Their English was patchy and the chauffeur helped to translate, and between interested and heated discussions in Hindi they learned about my trip through India, my gratitude at their kind offer of a lift and how much I liked the Indian people. The car was beautifully clean, the air conditioner a gift from heaven and driving through the cramped cow-ridden streets of Udaipur I felt the feeling of detachment that all rich Indians must feel: when you're in a comfortable car and a chauffeur is driving, those dingy backstreets aren't depressing, they're a circus that you can watch but don't have to suffer. The world becomes a

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movie and India becomes more than bearable, and the inquisitive stares of the locals through the blackened windows – beyond which they could see nothing but their own reflections – made me feel quite special. To my benefactors this was just a kind gesture, to me it was a glimpse into another way of life, that of the rich Indian.

I thanked them profusely when they dropped me off in town, and they all eagerly shook my hand and wished me the best (a performance repeated by the occupants of the second limousine even though I never spoke to any of them); and all of a sudden I was back in the India I knew and loved, the one with no air conditioning and a considerable amount of noise. I pottered around, playing karom[48] with some locals on the street and checking out the various craft shops dotted around. But that night I experienced a side of Udaipur that can only be classed as magical.

The Lake Palace Hotel

I had booked a table that night for dinner for three in the Lake Palace Hotel, the first hotel in the world to be built on a lake and one of the most amazing settings you could wish for; my dining partners were to be Phil and

[48] Karom is a game that's also popular in Nepal. It's a kind of finger pool played with draughts counters, where you flick the counters and try to knock others into pockets. It's actually really entertaining, and it doesn't require much effort, a blessing in the monsoon.

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Alex, the couple I'd met on the bus, and we were to meet at 7pm at the Lake Palace ferry terminal. This gave me plenty of time to go on a cruise round the lake before my sumptuous dining experience, and I duly boarded the boat at six. If you think Udaipur is beautiful from inside, it's truly magnificent from the lake.

As I've mentioned before, Lake Pichola contains two islands, Jagniwas (which is now the Lake Palace Hotel) and Jagmandir. The tour took me round the lake, from where the City Palace really shows off its grandeur, and to Jagmandir. Containing a picture-perfect Mughal garden with cupolas and graceful archways, the island is also home to the Jag Mandir palace, a beautifully symmetrical domed building that was said to have inspired aspects of the Taj Mahal, and which evoked a scene of Indian perfection that would be hard to match anywhere else. Through ornate lattice-work the City Palace gleamed, behind a perfect archway the Lake Palace glittered, and as the sun went down it cast an orange glow on the flock of huge bats that flew out onto the lake from the mainland, no doubt catching the swarms of insects coming out after the heat of the day. If one sight sums up the striking beauty of the Rajasthani aesthetic, it is Udaipur's lake.

I was back on the Lake Palace jetty spot on seven, eagerly awaiting a culinary experience enhanced by one of the most perfect settings one could wish for. I had

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suspended all concerns of budgets and exchange rates, and was going for the big spend: I had met plenty of travellers who said the expense of the Lake Palace was beyond them, but that wasn't going to stop me. I had company lined up, I had the time and the money, and I was going to enjoy every second.

By half past seven I was beginning to wonder if one of my dinner partners had got ill. I'd bumped into them on their rented motorbike that afternoon and they'd got the times all correct, so what could be the problem? I thought back to the previous day, Alex's birthday, when I had also booked a table for three and had arranged to meet them back at the hotel around four or five; but six o'clock had rolled by, then six-thirty, then seven, and I'd been kicking the walls by the time they rolled in at seven-thirty, but I just changed the booking, assuming it was a one-off. But waiting in the ferry terminal, I was beginning to wonder if I was the only one in this world who seemed to care about punctuality.

A pleasant Danish couple came and went, off for their own private romantic dinner for two, and still there was no sign of Phil and Alex; I figured it would be more pleasant to wait in the hotel bar, so I left a message with the porter and took the boat over to the hotel.

Even for someone numbed by two years of staying in hotels as part of a long-distant career, the Lake Palace Hotel was stunning. Little gardens with gambolling

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fountains and perfect herbaceous borders nestled between rows of white marble corridors, leading off to rooms whose sumptuousness I could but dream of: with prices starting at US$150 per night (and going much, much higher), I imagined they would indeed be special. The lobby was as perfect as a centre-page spread in *Country Life* and the bar was more conducive to decadent lounging than anywhere I'd seen in India, so I settled down into a comfortable settee with a complimentary copy of *Time* magazine and an assurance by the Reservations Manager that everything would be fine, even if my friends were running very late.

By eight o'clock I was in danger of verging on the self-pitying. After all, the Lake Palace was one of my main reasons for visiting Udaipur in the first place, and having had the promise of conversation over dinner I was dismayed at being stood up. I felt dejected and rejected – is a phone call too much to ask when you're over an hour late for a dinner appointment? – and in an environment like the Lake Palace, a place practically *designed* for couples and conversations, it was especially lonely. And that's when my faith in human nature was totally restored.

Into the bar walked the Danish man I'd said hello to on the jetty. He knew I was waiting for friends, and he'd seen me tapping my heels and worrying, so he wandered over and said that if my friends weren't turning up, I

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was more than welcome to join him and his girlfriend if I wanted. I could have kissed him: what a wonderful gesture. Of course, I accepted.

Brian and Lene were the perfect dinner companions. Interesting and interested, we talked our way through a sumptuous soup starter, ice-cold Kingfisher beer, a fiery chicken curry and more papads and nans than you could shake a stick at. They managed a dessert but I was bursting at the seams and settled for the decaffeinated coffee, an option I hadn't seen since Australia and which rounded off the meal perfectly. The waiters, immaculately turned out in white and red uniforms, were attentive and phenomenally polite, the quality of the spoken English was universally Oxfordian, and in every way the experience lived up to my expectations. Through the glass walls of the dining room fairy lights illuminated the fountains, the food was excellent and I paid the bill without even thinking, even adding a well-earned ten per cent tip at the end.

Incidentally, halfway through the meal Phil and Alex appeared on the other side of the dining room's glass wall, exploring the gardens. The first thing I noticed was that they hadn't bothered to change from their everyday clothes: Phil was staggeringly untidy in shorts, thongs and ragged T-shirt, and Alex's garb was simply plain (I had fished out my border-crossing clothes and looked pretty passable, while everyone else

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in the hotel looked as well turned out as you would expect in a high-class hotel). Nevertheless I waved to them to come in and eat, an hour and a half late though they were, and they acknowledged me and wandered off. That was the last I saw of them: they never came in to say hello, and didn't bother to tell me they'd decided not to eat there. I saw them the next morning, and apparently they thought it was 'a bit too fancy, you know'. I didn't know, but held back from orally punching their lights out because there's no point in making enemies of people whom you'll never see again in your life. Not surprisingly I didn't exchange addresses with them, and for all I cared they could fuck off back home to their world of poor manners and lack of taste. More fool them.

I did, however, exchange addresses with Brian and Lene, wishing them well for the rest of their four-week holiday in India. I reflected that out of miserable situations good things often rise, but it taught me a lesson that I've learned again and again but seem unable to grasp fully: people are unreliable, and if you want something done, do it yourself. That's why I wonder if I'll ever be able to travel with other people: there are so many people out there for whom strangulation at birth would have been a kindness, and a fair few of them are travelling the world. Thank goodness that for every Phil and Alex there's a Brian and Lene, or my faith in

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humanity would have evaporated a long time ago.

Oh, and just how much did this extravaganza of food and luxury cost me? I checked my bill later and found it was just under Rs700. That's a shade over £10. Incredible, isn't it: it makes the western excuse of 'I can't afford it' as offensive as the rich Indian's attitude at the Taj Mahal. Like I said, some people just don't deserve to travel.

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Gujarat and Diu

Louis Armstrong

Written: 5 June 1998

On Friday 5th Louis Armstrong saved the day. I had tried to get a berth on the sleeper train south from Udaipur to Ahmedabad, but all I managed was a waiting list ticket: the last time that happened was back in Siliguri, and I really didn't fancy having to squirm my way into some idiot middle manager's good books just to get a reservation. Even so I idly asked about the VIP quota, was told to visit the Area Manager, who referred me back to the Ticket Inspector, who eventually referred me back to the original ticket office. I decided to stuff the railway and get the bus, and joined my final queue for a refund.

When I got to the front of the queue there was nobody at the window, but hanging out at the back reading a list of computer printouts was a big, burly black man who looked exactly like an Indian version of King Louis. He saw me looking dejected at the window, came over, looked at my ticket and said in a deep, throaty voice, 'No problem, sir, I am on that train. You just turn up and I will find you a place.'

'You will?' I asked, wondering if this would turn

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out to be an expensive exercise.

‘I am the conductor on that train,’ he winked, and turned back to his printouts. Even if he was setting me up for a major *baksheesh* kick, I felt he deserved to be taken at face value, and nine hours later I was waiting on the platform, wondering if I was going to be spending the night propped up in the toilet, nodding off onto someone else’s shoulder.

But Louis was a man of his word. I spotted him holding court on the platform, went over and gave him my ticket, and he said, ‘I remember, from this morning. Berth six, that coach over there, OK?’ As he said ‘OK’ he flashed me a smile, and I wondered for a fleeting moment how much this was going to cost me: I would have to pay for a conversion from waiting list to berth anyway, and it would be a perfect opportunity for rubbing thumb and forefinger together in a meaningful way. Still, I figured he would deserve it.

The train pulled out only an hour late, and I soon discovered that not only was I in a separate compartment labelled ‘Ladies Only’ with lockable doors and only six berths, but I was in there with five other passengers who’d had similar experiences: they’d had no booking but had also ended up with a berth. I told them about Louis and it turned out that he had saved us all: one westerner, two Indians by birth who had spent their whole lives abroad and were on their first visit

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back to their homeland, and three obviously influential Indian upper middle class family members. I felt privileged and somewhat relieved: if there were to be any *baksheesh*, we would all have to pay.

Ten minutes into the journey Louis appeared at the door, beaming. He sat down in an empty space and boomed, ‘No charge for these berths for you: I like to help you all.’ He then proceeded to give money – presumably change – to the middle class Indian man, and idly chatted in Urdu for a while (in which all the others were fluent, the overseas Indians having learned it from their parents). Then he asked me a few politely interested census questions in English, said he was really happy to have been of help, and left us to sleep our way to Ahmedabad.

And as I drifted off I thought to myself, what a *wonderful* world.

Bhavnagar

Written: 8 June 1998

‘Welcome to the city of Bhavnagar,’ said the man on the train as he hopped off, picking up his son whom he’d been trying to wake up for the last ten minutes, with little success. I’d changed trains in Ahmedabad, staying long enough only to admire the fast food joint at the station (the first I’d seen since the Wimpy in

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Bangalore), and had wasted no time in heading even further south. This was a new state, Gujarat, and I didn't want my opinions to be tainted by the industrial black hole of its capital.

Bhavnagar is notable for nothing (at least, as far as the visitor to India is concerned). I was staying there as a base from which to visit the ship-breaking yard of Alang, some 50km to the southeast, but Bhavnagar reminded me not only of the delights of travelling in a rarely visited state in the off-season, but also of the main reason for my enjoyment of India: the people. I have come across wonderfully friendly pockets in India – Hyderabad, Thanjavur, Bijapur et al – but Bhavnagar wins hands down as the friendliest place I have been. English was almost non-existent beyond pidgin greetings, but communication doesn't have to be in tongues: people ran up to me to shake my hand and to try to find out what I was doing here in India, children shouted out, 'ElloElloEllo!' for five minutes after I'd passed, and even the old men squatting on the side of the road smiled back with toothy grins as I greeted them (a rare occurrence: even in the friendliest places the older generation, those who remember the British rule, tend to be too reserved or resentful to smile at foreigners). The man on the train had been the tip of an iceberg of warm generosity.

On the Saturday afternoon that I arrived I decided to

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meet the locals. The best way to do this is to try to mind your own business, so I found my way to the central park, sat down in the shade of a tree and started reading a book. Sure enough within five minutes I had a crowd of maybe twenty young men goggling at me, gawking at the maps and pictures in my guidebook and listening in uncomprehending awe as I described my trip with hand signs and city names. After half an hour of this entertainment (tiring for me, riveting for them) I wandered over to the other side of the park and as I was about to leave to go for a siesta, I spotted a group of old and middle-aged men under a neem tree, yelling and screaming like school children at recess. I just had to go and look.

They welcomed me into the group with smiles and invitations to sit down: not one of them had any English beyond the incredibly basic, but this didn't matter. The object of their fascination was a game called Aman Chache which I will describe here in the same way that a North Carolinan might describe chess: after hours of watching I still had no idea of even the most basic rules of the game. But it was fascinating to watch…

Aman Chache

Under the greenery of the neem[49] was a large square

[49] A fascinating and typically Indian tree, the neem is not just used for shading games of Aman Chache. Its leaves contain a mild poison that

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piece of sackcloth, on which was drawn a large plus-sign, each arm of which was divided into three squares across and eight squares along; three of these squares had Xs in them. There were four teams of four men each (it's definitely a game for the boys), each team sitting or squatting along one side of the large sack cloth. Four game pieces were distributed to each team – the four team colours being red, green, black and white – with each piece made out of wood in the shape of a large, very blunt bullet. To complete the set was the shell of half a coconut and six small sea shells of the variety that are roughly oval in shape, with smooth white backs and evil slits in the other side, lined with ridges that under a magnifying glass would remind you of a shark's mouth.

Each person would take it in turn to throw the six shells, which would land jaw-side up, or smooth side up; by counting the number of jaws you would get a number from one to six (so the shells did exactly the same job as a conventional die). There my understanding of the game evaporates.

Some numbers were special, some not so special, but I couldn't discern a pattern. Sometimes pieces were moved, sometimes not, but I couldn't discern a pattern.

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kills bacteria (though doesn't harm humans in very small doses), and as a result neem extract has been used as a kind of toothpaste in India for hundreds of years. Smearing neem on your teeth kills the bacteria that cause tooth decay, thus preserving your teeth so you can chew *pan* and *really* bugger up the enamel…

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Sometimes pieces were turned onto their sides, sometimes onto their heads, but I couldn't discern a pattern. Sometimes pieces were taken, sometimes they were added to the board, but I couldn't discern a pattern. And eventually someone would win, but even in that I couldn't discern a pattern. 'This an ancient Indian game,' was how one spectator explained the rules: funnily enough this made everything quite clear.

But it wasn't the game so much as the *people* who were fascinating to me. Sitting and standing round the board was the most assorted collection of Indian men you could ever hope to see. On one corner was a gaunt Muslim with his long chin beard, no moustache and white cap fitted over his short hair; he concentrated hard on the game, seeming serious but ever willing to join in the jokes and laugh along with everyone else. Opposite him was a man with such an incredibly hooked nose it made his moustache look like a furry caterpillar trapped between his upper lip and his nostrils. Just along from him was an evidently well-educated man who analysed the game, provided a running commentary on every move and tactic and, when he threw the shells, twisted his wrist in such a flourish that it didn't really matter whether the throw was good or bad, because it looked so stylish; even taking other pieces was a display, as he smashed the piece taken with the victorious piece, sending the unfortunate one careening off into the dust.

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Dotted about were four clowns who spent most of the game throwing stones at each other, pretending to get furious with each other and, on the point of throwing punches, collapsing into huge grins and belly laughs, dragging everyone else into with them their boyish humour. I imagined their conversations were along the lines of:

'You hit me first.'

'Didn't.'

'Did too, he saw it.'

'You're mad, mad as a monkey.'

'Who you calling a monkey?'

'You, mad man.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'You're just as crazy…'

The others kept nudging me, pointing at them and tapping the sides of their heads; and everyone loved it.

And all the while the men fished out beedis from their top pockets[50], filling the air with acrid blue smoke that added a certain mysticism to the event, a ritual only matched by the frequent *chai* breaks and passing round

[50] The Indian top pocket in the ubiquitous Indian shirt is the equivalent of bank, corner shop, handbag and personal organiser all rolled into one. Beedi packets sit next to rolls of bank notes, mixed up with addresses, tickets, receipts and normally some little sweets to suck on. It makes some men look positively Amazonian with this huge bulge on their left breast, but it's amazing what you can fit in a top pocket. And there's another couple more in the trousers too…

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of the cold water. After four hours I had to eat something, but I would return the next day on my way back from Alang, and I would be beckoned over, made to sit down, plied with *chai* and totally welcomed. I sent them copies of the pictures I took – which they thrilled to, posing like adult kids – and I hope they give them as much pleasure as they did me.

Elsewhere in Bhavnagar…

Bhavnagar had all the fun of the fair, literally. Dominating the dried-up tank in the centre of town was a large Big Wheel, flanked by lethal looking contraptions designed to fling you around at gravitational forces beyond the healthy. This was an opportunity too good to miss: a real Indian fun fair, totally free of western influence and teeming with cultural niceties to make the rides themselves almost irrelevant. I paid my Rs2 entry fee and slipped quietly into the bright lights and noise of dangerously clanking machinery.

It didn't last long. Each ride was Rs5 a go, so I headed straight for the boldest ride of the lot, the Big Wheel. Creaking tremulously it started up with eight of us dotted around the huge wheel – business was not exactly booming at the fair, to be honest – and after an experience supposed to be thrilling but not medically threatening (though with the thought of only Indian

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engineering maintenance keeping me afloat it sent my heart palpitations higher than is regarded as healthy) I stumbled through the exit gate into the throng.

I was followed by one of the boys off the ride. Latching on to me he tugged at my arm and said, ‘Dollar!’ I told him to bugger off. ‘Rupees!’ he continued, and I told him to bugger off. ‘Paise!’ he ventured, and when I told him to bugger off for the third time he neatly summed up his command of the English language by sticking the needle in the groove marked ‘Dollar! Rupees! Paise!’ and following me with his stuck-record mantra cutting through the noise. I tried another ride, a seriously spinning set of two-person cars that ensured the little Indian boy who ended up in my car couldn’t avoid being flung into the spleen of the funny white man next to him. He thoroughly enjoyed himself, but I felt pretty damn queasy afterwards and went for a wander round the attractions to clear my head, constantly accompanied by the cries of ‘Dollar! Rupees! Paise!’

The fair was small but was obviously a focus for the single young men and women of Bhavnagar: to put it bluntly, it was the Indian equivalent of the pick-up joint. Stunningly crafted costumes adorned beautiful young women as they stuck together in giggling packs, while depressingly out-dated young men in teddy boy haircuts and mundane clothes adored themselves in the vain

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hope that the women would follow their example. But was it a vain hope? Judging by the way the girls enjoyed this primitive display of male strutting, the course of true love can obviously still run smooth even if one half of the couple has all the charisma of a latter day Elvis.

When my head had stopped spinning and the money mantra had drifted into the background noise[51] I started off for home, but on the way I met a very friendly couple of young man on their incredibly cool moped who, after opening the conversation with the somewhat confusing 'You want woman for sex?' and an inquiry into whether I had any alcohol (Gujarat is a dry state), turned out to be as polite and interesting as the rest of Bhavnagar. They offered me a lift on their bike back to my hotel, I acquiesced, and soon found myself being paraded in front of their friends at the local Hindi tape stall, telling them that I thought Hindi music was the worst noise I'd heard for years and that I'd rather die than buy a tape off them, but thanks anyway. We all laughed, they took me back home and I fell into a deep, contented sleep.

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[51] Which included lots of hissing. Indians get each others' attention by hissing instead of yelling, so every time you walk through a bazaar or a street where people want to talk to you, the air fills with 'Tsss! Tsss!' and you have to quell the western irritation that comes with being treated like a dog rather than a human. It's not rude, though, it's just another cultural difference, but one that takes quite a bit of getting used to.

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Alang

Written: 7 June 1998

Wrecker's yards, where cars go to die, are sad places. With twin headlights, a grinning radiator grille and a smiling curve to the bumper, your average car looks human, whether it's the frog-eyed bewilderment of the VW Beetle, the blockheaded bouncer look of the Volvo, the cute innocence of the Mini or the slit-eyed sophistication of the Ferrari. Stacks of rusting and half-dismantled cars look depressing because we personify them, subconsciously succumbing to anthropomorphic images of retirement homes, mass graves and the ignominy of death. I should know: I spent plenty of time in Australia searching for bits to make my car, Oz, king of the road.

What about ships, though? With their proud bows and blunt sterns they're hard to associate with living creatures, let alone humans. Ships are sleek, ships are always female, but despite man's long history of glorifying and waxing lyrical about boats and the sea, from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to *The Old Man and the Sea*, they're less human than vessel. The only personality I associated with *Zeke* was that of gaoler, and despite the curves of the *QE II* and the gushing success of *Titanic*, ships aren't people, they're machines: that's why Herbie and Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang were cars, not boats.

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But try telling that to someone who visits Alang. Stretching along the west coast of the Gulf of Camray some 50km southeast of Bhavnagar, Alang is the biggest ship-breaking yard in the world, and it has to be seen to be believed. Official statistics are hard to come by where Alang is concerned, not just because of the tendency of Indians to make up statistics to pad out the relevant forms, but because Alang has been the centre of human rights issues for some time and the government is more than a little sensitive about the whole thing.

However, gleaning what information I could from the local *chai* shop owners, I discovered the following: Alang consists of 400 breaker's yards (known as platforms) where somewhere between 20,000 and 40,000 workers dismantle ships by hand. An average ship has 300 people working on it at any one time, who take two months to break the ship down completely. The whole complex breaks about 1500 ships per year, and when I say ship I mean everything from supertankers to war ships to car ferries to container ships. The statistics are impressive.

Getting to Alang

Because the working conditions are appalling and safety levels are laughably non-existent, Alang is a major draw for the poor of India who are desperate for a job, any job. People from Orissa and Bihar, two of the poorest

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states, make up a large percentage of the workers, but there are people from everywhere from Tamil Nadu to Nepal. I was waiting for the bus in Bhavnagar on the morning of Sunday 7th June – I took the phrase 'it's difficult to reach by bus, so take a taxi for the day' in my guidebook as a personal challenge, especially as there were four or five buses each way per day – and while I was trying to work out the bus timetable a *sadhu* wandered up to me, saffron clad and clutching a bag and a plastic container half full of what looked like month-old yoghurt. 'Where are you going?' he asked.

'Alang,' I replied. 'To see the ships.'

'So am I,' he said. 'I'm going to start work there.'

We chatted for a bit – his English was pretty good – and eventually the right bus pulled in and we hopped on. An hour and a half later we were sipping *chai*[52] in Alang, looking out over the platforms where the ships lay in various stages of disarray.

The word 'platform' when applied to Alang is a

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[52] This is a different act depending on where you are sipping it. Normally *chai* is served in a glass, either in a small full glass or a large half-full glass, in which case you just drink it normally. If you're served *chai* in a cup and shallow saucer, you should pour the *chai* into the saucer and drink the *chai* from the saucer. Finally (and this is more common in the south) if you are served *chai* in a cup and deep saucer, you should pour the *chai* into the saucer, then pour it back into the cup, and drink from the cup; this is to mix in the sugar that's sitting idly on the bottom, so if you don't like your *chai* sweet you don't pour it and mix it up. Oh, and service tea is the name for the way we drink it in England, with separate milk and a teapot, but that's service tea, not *chai*. *Chai* is to tea what McDonald's is to *haute cuisine* – it tastes great!

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euphemism: the platforms are simply beach. When a new ship is about to be broken up, the beach in the relevant yard is totally cleaned, even down to the last nut and bolt (nothing is wasted in this recycling operation), and then the ship is driven straight at the beach at breakneck speed so that it quite literally beaches itself. This part is finely tuned and has been done so many times that the ships are rarely more than a few metres off the desired position, which is a relief when you think of what would happen if they applied Indian bus logic to beaching a supertanker.

Alang is a suitable place for such crazy antics because it has a pretty eccentric tidal system. The tide is high only twice a month, which is when the sea covers the yards and new ships are beached; then for two weeks at a time the tide recedes, leaving the ships out of the water and easy to work on. And what work it is: everything that is detachable that can be sold is removed from the inside, all the engines are gutted and removed and then the ship's body itself is dismantled, chunk by chunk. The road into town is lined with large warehouses stacked high with doors, lathes, engine parts, beds, entire kitchen ranges, life jackets: you name it, if it's on a ship, you can buy it cheap in Alang. Most of the bits are trucked straight out to customers, but there's plenty left over for the high street stores.

The sight of a beached ship with half its front

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removed is both awesome and gruesome, because despite the lack of humanity in a fully intact ship, when it's sitting there with its guts hanging out it's hard not to pity the poor thing. It might be pity in the sense that we pity moth-eaten teddy bears or unlucky cartoon characters, but the sheer immensity of the beasts makes such pity harrowing. I saw destroyers losing their final battle against the blow torch and hacksaw, I saw container ships sagging into the sand as the P&O sign was pulled down, I saw roll-on roll-off ferries rolling over and dying: even without an obvious face, it was slightly funereal.

But the appeal of Alang is also scientific. The whole place is like a huge, lifelike book of cross-section drawings, a real life lesson in how the engines fit into a supertanker, how those millions of air vents and electricity conduits mesh together inside the hull of a navy ship, and how much of a ship is crammed with gear and how much is just empty space. In the West we are familiar with yards that make ships but not those that break them, and you don't make a ship from bow to stern, you make it in parts: hull first, then the structural innards, then the pleasantries of furnishing. In Alang it's a horizontal destruction irrespective of what order the insides were put in, and as such it's a unique sight.

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Visit to the Ashram

I was impressed by the view from the *chai* shop, but what I really wanted to do was to get inside a yard and nose around: I wasn't stupid enough to want to climb around on a half-deconstructed ship, but some close-up views would have been great. My new-found friend said there would be plenty of time to worry about getting permission from the Port Officer later: first, it was time to visit his ashram.

This was an opportunity too good to miss. I'd avoided ashrams totally so far, and the thought of seeing one in such a godforsaken place as Alang was intriguing. We tootled along the road, past yard after yard and ship after ship, and soon ended up at the Siva ashram of the Gopnath Temple, a ramshackle but friendly complex surrounding yet another Hindu temple tucked away from the main coast road. Inside were other *sadhus* sitting cross-legged on some mats, and so we joined them.

I'd often wondered what made *sadhus* tick, and my visit to Gopnath confirmed my suspicions: they're a bunch of stoners. The man who was introduced to me as the big cheese at Gopnath ashram was puffing away on a *chillum* packed with *charas* (a pipe packed with marijuana, that is), and as we rolled up he offered it to me.

I declined because it was obvious that Alang was

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going to be fascinating enough without chemical aid and I didn't want to get memory loss, but he packed another one and passed it round the circle, everybody inhaling right down to their toes except for me and a couple of guys who were having their palm read.

Five minutes later they were buggered but very hospitable, inviting me to dinner that night (which I also declined because I'd be back in Bhavnagar) and letting me take their pictures, as long as I promised to send them copies (which I did). But I wanted to see the ships, so I said goodbye to my now inert friend, who had decided to put off his job-hunting until four o'clock (though, come to think of it, he didn't say which day), and strolled back to the surf.

The Yards of Alang

I had previously met a few westerners who had visited Alang, and their advice had been not only to avoid taking pictures, but to leave my camera at home: unauthorised photography was not tolerated and would result in the removal of your film and undoubtedly a big *baksheesh* bill. I'd brought my camera anyway, and was mighty glad that I had: possibly the fact that it was Sunday made a difference, or the fact that it was high tide and the ships were being smacked by waves, but there were no workers to be seen, just a few lazing gate keepers, and quite a few of them let me in to wander

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among the guts of ships from all over the world. Only one of them asked for anything – two Cokes, which I didn't bother to buy him seeing as lots of other places weren't asking a thing – and another bloke took a fancy to my biro (which he duly pinched) but there were no officials, no *baksheesh* issues and no problems with taking photos.

So I took 'em. The hotel man would later say that I had been very lucky being able to take photos – most tourists were stopped and denied permission – and I would later meet a woman who had been accosted by a policeman with no badge, no gun and no proof of status except for his uniform (which looked suspiciously like a bus conductor's anyway) who tried to charge her for her camera. I was lucky indeed: my experience was far from negative.

The yards were surprisingly clean: I had imagined oil slicks three feet deep and piles of rusting metal clogging up the entire environment. In reality the sea was fairly blue (inevitably it's not going to be mineral water round a ship breaking yard) and the beach was recognisable as sand, though I recalled that most of the objections to Alang from the international community were over working conditions rather than environmental concerns. Whatever the case, it's a good example of western hypocrisy because the ships keep coming, whatever the issues; dozens of ships were floating

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offshore, waiting their turn, looking well-used and battered in the way that only old ships can. For a fleeting moment I thought of homes for the elderly and waiting for God, but only for a moment. Ships aren't human, OK?

Cricket Among the Ships

The inhabitants of Alang are, though, and they're also incredibly friendly. As I wandered past the yards and admired the workers' slums leaning against each other, I smiled and got smiles back, I wobbled my head and got wobbling heads in return, and I waved and got raised palms for my trouble. And halfway back to the bus stand I came across a handful of boys playing cricket across the main road – steadfastly ignoring trucks and cycles as they turfed up the wicket – and they insisted that I join in.

I must have played for a good hour, batting and bowling my way into the history books. I was wearing my bush hat so I became 'Shane Warne' to the locals, and one of the boys who was a pretty good batsman became 'Sachin Tendulkar'. We drew a crowd and I drew on skills not used since school, but eventually it drew to an end, the heat killing my energy, ruining my spin and reminding me that I had to get back to Bhavnagar before I was stuck here forever. The people might be wonderful, but Alang isn't the sort of place

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you want to be stranded in.

Finally, my Bhavnagar hotel just served to underline how friendly the area was. The previous night I'd dropped my bag onto a marble table and the bloody thing had come loose from the wall, smashing on the ground and shattering; even the Rolling Stones would have been proud at my ability to ruin a hotel room so comprehensibly. I assumed the reaction would be typically Indian and would turn into a barely restrained discussion on how much I would have to pay, but the reaction in Bhavnagar? 'I am sorry, sir, would you like to have a different room?'

I was gobsmacked, and hardly wanted to leave.

Palitana

Written: 9 June 1998

So you want to build a temple: that makes sense. So you want people to come to your temple: that makes sense. So you find a hill towering 600m above the dry scrubland of the Gujarat peninsula and stick your temple right on the top in the most inaccessible point of all, and then build a 3000-step staircase for your flock to climb: that makes no sense, but that's what you do if you're a Jain.

Jains in India number about 4.5 million, which is pretty damn small when you consider that the religion

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originated here at about the same time as Buddhism (500 BC). But is it any wonder? If I had to sweat my way up a bloody great mountain every time I wanted to go to church, I'd consider swapping to the monkey and the elephant too.

It struck me that intentionally building your temples in the middle of nowhere was a strange thing to do, and it struck me as bordering on the insane to build a whole hilltop of temples – 863 in all – in such a place, but that's precisely what the Jains did at Palitana, where the Place of Victory stands atop a huge hill in the plains. They did a similar job again at Junagadh, also in Gujarat, where there are 10,000 steps and even more temples, but Palitana was on my way south from Bhavnagar to Diu, so I decided to go there to see what it was that drove such people to create so many temples in such a ludicrous location.

These were my thoughts as I dumped my bags and took a rickshaw out to the base of the steps, and whatever I was thinking about the Jains and their crazy architectural extremes, their gods[53] were listening. From the second I stepped into the rickshaw to my arrival at

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[53] OK, Jainism doesn't have deities, rather 24 prophets (known as tirthankars) who formulated a religious philosophy as opposed to a theistic system of belief. Jain temples may look very Hindu, but the religion is far closer to Buddhism. The huge statues of the tirthankars dotted round India are like huge standing Buddhas with penises, but the temples are lively and as crammed with carvings as Hindu shrines. It's an interesting variation on the theme.

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the temple complex, they did everything in their power to dissuade me from getting there, or perhaps they were simply enforcing their belief that you have to put in the effort to get close to enlightenment. Whatever, they were in control, not me.

No Pain, No Gain

It started with the rain, a severe tropical downpour that flooded the streets, shot sideways into the rickshaw cab and soaked me to the skin. It stopped as I arrived, but the stone steps leading up to the temples (which are too far away to be seen from the bottom) were like a skating rink. In an attempt not to offend the Jain religion, I had left all my leather items behind, so I had no sun hat and no leather boots, just my umbrella and flimsy flip-flops. My flip-flops had absolutely no grip, especially on wet marble, which only helped to add to the fun.

Then the wind got up and decided to have a go. I barely managed to put down my umbrella in time, as the few hardy trees lining the staircase bent double, clouds flew across the sky like impatient commuters on the motorway, and flicks of rain stung my eyes. Five minutes up the track and I had a throbbing headache from the wind battering my undefended ears.

As if these elemental displays weren't enough, just before the halfway mark I felt a familiar stirring in my lower gut: diarrhoea. It would turn out to be a mild bout,

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lasting for only the rest of that day, but I couldn't quite believe the timing: things were beginning to get worryingly difficult. I idly wondered what else the tirthankars wanted. Blood?

They got blood soon after inflicting my guts. Turning to wave at a friendly family who were sitting on the side of the stairs taking a break, I stubbed my big toe on a marble step. The hard stone ripped a sizable hole in the end of my toe, stinging enough to elicit the mad hopping effect more normally associated with painful bangs to the head, and when the throbbing had subsided to a bearable level I saw that it was pretty nasty: a flap of skin hung loosely over a round hole, and it stung. This in flip-flops, too, where all manner of grot and grime could infect the wound. I vowed to go on: smiling through adversity is a good trait in every religion, and I decided to show the tirthankars that I was worthy.

On the way I passed plenty of other struggling pilgrims[54], but they all seemed to be going down. Most sensible people make the ascent in the morning before the heat of the midday sun, but my schedule had seen me on a bus all morning, and I'd set off just after lunch. Those coming down, apart from saying, 'You too late,

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[54] And plenty of pilgrims being carried down in pure comfort, sitting in dooli swing chairs lugged around by wiry men. Interestingly most of the people in doolis were fat, and I idly wondered whether the merit gained by a visit to the temples would be knocked right down if you paid someone else to carry you there and back. I smugly thought so, as I sweated my way up the marble slide.

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very hot,' all the time, were delightful, and most of them were only too happy to say hello and pass the time of day. One guy pressed Rs1.25 into my hand as he passed and said, 'For the temple, give to temple,' (which, of course, I did) and another waved me down for a rest and a pidgin chat. His English was as limited as his enthusiasm was unbounded.

'Nem?' he inquired.

'My name? Oh, Tarzan.'

'Uh,' he grunted.

'Me Tarzan, you Jain. Geddit?'

'Uh.'

'That was a joke…'

'Uh.'

'Ah.'

'Uh.'

'Um, I think I go up.'

'Uh.'

'Bye-bye.'

'Bye-bye.'

His fluency was comparatively good. Most of the kids greeted me with an enthusiastic 'Bye-bye', much as they'd done in Mandu; one came out with the wonderful 'Hello-bye'; and others struggled through to ask, 'Country name?' But the friendliness of the Gujarati Jains shone through, and eventually I reached the top, intrigued to see what it was these kind people were

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worshipping.

A Whole Hill of Temples

It was worth the struggle. Jain temples are smothered with carvings in much the same way that Hindu temples are, but they're quite different on closer investigation. Hindu stone carvings of women are interesting, but the Jains make them so voluptuous they manage to portray the eroticism of Konark's Sun Temple without the biological diagrams. People played ancient guitars and old kings grimaced in beards, the prophets looked passively happy (much like the Buddha) and the sheer impact of having so many temples crammed together in one place made it a fascinating place to wander round, even for someone who has overdosed on Indian temples.

The best part about Jain temples are the idols. Sitting in the lotus position and variously smiling enigmatically or meditating heavily, the Jain idols look fairly Buddhist but have one very striking feature: their eyes are made of clear and black glass that catches any stray light, making the dark interiors of the temples glow with eerie pairs of lights suspended in the black. It's like something out of Scooby Doo, especially with all the bats that inhabit the dark recesses of every Indian temple. My lonely trek through the temples on the Place of Victory was really quite spooky at times.

The worst part about any temple is the ever-present

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charge for camera and shoes scam. I have no objection to paying for entry into a temple, and I have no objection to paying someone to guard my shoes while I'm inside and barefoot, but at Palitana the people in charge of payment were such arseholes that it felt painful to hand over money to them rather than into a locked donations box. I rocked up to pay my fee, and you could tell they were after more than just the Rs25 entrance fee: four lazy bastards sat behind protective desks, exuding an attitude of 'I'm in charge and if I can't be bothered to let you in there's nothing you can do about it', and they instantly tried to squeeze things out of me.

'You smoke?' said the man with the slimiest moustache.

'No,' I said, knowing full well he was after a cigarette and knowing full well that even if I had some, which I didn't, he wasn't going to get one. 'Smoking is injurious to health,' I continued, quoting the Indian government health warning stamped on every packet. 'Do you smoke?'

'Yes,' he said.

'Then you will die,' I said, smiling facetiously. 'Can I have a camera permit, please?'

'You have coins?' he tried.

'It's 25 rupees for the permit,' I said, 'and I give you one hundred. You give me 75 rupees change. No

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coins necessary, so why do you ask for coins? Here, 100 rupees.'

Seeing this, he uttered the war cry of every shop owner in India, irrespective of the status of their top pockets, 'No change.'

'No money for you, then,' I said, and turned for the door, producing the expected result and the expected change. 'Where is the donations box?' I asked, and they produced it for me to put the kind pilgrim's coins in.

'Some Jains you are,' I muttered and stomped out of the office. 'You don't even know the meaning of the word abstinence.' Perhaps this criticism of the impious placated the Jain prophets because the sun broke through the clouds long enough for me to explore the main enclosure and get my money's worth. It was amazing.

Back Down Again

The scams weren't over, though. Before long the clouds rolled back in and I rolled back down, reflecting that on a clear day you can see the sea from Palitana, but all I could see were puddles reflecting. It wasn't unpleasant though, and I took a slow horse cart back to the hotel for Rs20, handing over a pretty tatty Rs20 note at the end and wandering off.

'No good,' tapped a voice on my shoulder, and turning round I saw a young man holding out my

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battered Rs20 note; the old man who owned the tonga had obviously sent his young sidekick after me to get a better note. It's a common problem in India: notes become disgusting fairly quickly and hardly ever see the inside of a bank to get replaced, and if a note's particularly lacerated you'll have grave problems getting rid of it. Funnily enough you can have the most leprous note that nobody will accept, but put it inside a clear plastic sheath and staple it shut, and it's fine. My Rs20 note was having more problems holding itself together than Michael Jackson, but I wasn't in the mood for an argument, so I just said, 'OK then,' grabbed my note back, ducked under a horse's head and sauntered off into the bus station to check some bus times.

That worked. Seeing your hard-earned cash disappearing into the crowd is enough to motivate even the laziest Indian, and sure enough the man came running after me shouting, 'OK, OK, OK,' and accepted the money. It felt great to win for once, especially in a place like Palitana, which, the Place of Victory aside, is a depressing dump that deserves no more mention in this travelogue.

I'll also gloss over the journey from Palitana to Diu because this is supposed to be a family show and unnecessary swearing simply isn't required.

Unlike on the journey itself.

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Hindi Pop

Written: 19 June 1998

There was only one music cassette in use on the buses in India, and I heard it everywhere; the result was that despite several months of inserting my ear plugs whenever the bus boys cranked the latest Hindi pop hits up to eleven, I still knew the latest hits backwards (which, incidentally, improved the sound).

It wasn't confined to the buses, either. I heard it in shops, I heard it in buses, I heard it in rickshaws, I heard it in restaurants, and on bad nights I heard it in my sleep. It was a compilation of Hindi pop hits of 1998 (that's hits with a silent 's') and I was almost tempted to buy a copy simply so I could glare at it.

The Hindi pop you get on Indian buses isn't unique in being irritating; every country in the world has some kind of music that's designed to make the ears ache. For example, the majority of the music in Australian and New Zealand is western, and as such has good bits and appalling bits, while the tribal music of the Aborigines and Maoris is highly emotive and well worth investigating; Polynesian music is also tribal, and it's pretty interesting until the ukulele kicks in, which it unfortunately does all too often; Indonesian music is either abysmal pop from fat Elvis clones, or intriguing traditional *gamelan* music that sounds like the introduction to Peter Gabriel's *San Jacinto* played on an

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out-of-tune set of tubular bells; Singaporean music is a melting pot of its neighbours' efforts, but it is effectively being swallowed up by rock and roll; I can't really remember the music in Malaysia or Thailand, but I remember one bus journey – I forget which country – where the musical accompaniment bore a scary resemblance to the sound of a cat scratching its claws down a blackboard; and Indian and Nepalese music is wonderfully diverse, with traditional tabla music, the wonderful sound of the sitar, entertaining film music, and the kind of pop music that is chirpy, bouncy and annoying in the way that happy morning people are when you've got a bastard hangover behind the eyes.

So is Hindi pop more irritating than any other country's pap? It depends: I remember almost gnawing my left leg off while putting up with Indonesian pop, I remember Thai videos on buses frying my brain cells, and I'll keep my thoughts about the ukulele to myself. Hindi music, though, is close to winning, because the voices have an amazing way of cutting through any other noise, be it the rumble of the bus or the fascinating cacophony of life in India. The women who sing Hindi pop music sound like they are on helium[55] and the men

[55] Often this is due to a faulty tape mechanism playing the tape too quickly: I put one of my tapes into a supposedly posh Indian tape deck, and even Sheryl Crow sounded light and shrill. I'm convinced that if the local equivalents of Andrew Eldritch's and Janis Joplin's 40-a-day voices ever appeared on the Indian pop scene, they would be burned at the stake for heresy in much the same way that Elvis was for his earth-

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basically shout, so whatever the lyrical and compositional subtleties, it sounds to the unwary like a kind of aural warfare. Add in string sections that sound like the Eeee-Eeee-Eeee from *Psycho*'s shower scene, and you have a musical experience that can only be described as invasive, which is a shame, because Hindi pop[56] is everywhere in India.

On top of this, Hindi pop songs are plugged so remorselessly that even if the music weren't so invasive, it would still get to me; there's no kind of music in the world that can stand that sort of constant playing. Especially not *Hindi Pop Hits of 1998*…

Diu

Written: 14 June 1998

Diu feels like a frontier town and, given both its distant and recent history, it's not surprising. Stuck out on a limb at the southernmost tip of Gujarat, the island of Diu was one of the few Portuguese colonies in India (the

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shattering hip movements in the fifties.

[56] I'm not talking about Hindi film music here, because although it might sound the same to the uninitiated, Hindi film music is really rather skilled. In the films, singer-songwriters are not common, and there's normally a composer who writes the music, a lyricist who writes the words, a group of singers who sing the songs, and the actors who mime and dance along on the screen. The composing and lyricism is in a different league to bog-standard Hindi pop, and the dancing is, without a doubt, spectacular and highly skilled, and puts bands like Boyzone to shame. If only all Indian pop was this impressive; unfortunately, it isn't.

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others being Goa and Daman). Between the 14th and 16th centuries Diu was an important trading post for the Ottoman Turks, but in 1535 the Portuguese took control on their second attempt, building a huge fort and settling in for a long old occupation. They finally left in 1961 when the Indian Air Force bombed the airport, destroyed the fortress church and lost the lives of seven soldiers and a handful of civilians: Operation Vijay worked, though, and Diu joined the Indian Union.

It's not part of Gujarat, though: it's governed from Delhi in a similar way that Pondicherry is (they're both Union Territories), and this adds to the feeling of isolation. Not only is Diu geographically out in the sticks, it's culturally different too, most noticeably in the availability of alcohol. Gujarat is a dry state – the only one left, as far as I could make out – but Diu is not only very wet, it's very cheap (Rs30 for a 650 ml bottle of beer is not bad going).

This helped to explain the reaction of the Gujaratis I had met on the way from Bhavnagar to Diu: when they had found out I was heading for Diu, they asked if I had any drink with me, what that was in my water bottle (water, as a matter of fact) and whether I liked to get drunk. Initially it didn't click: 'You go Diu? What is that you drinking?' didn't make any sense until I remembered the lack of alcohol in Gujarat. Then it started to irritate me, because everyone automatically

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assumed that because I was going to Diu, I was an alcoholic.

This might be true for Indian visitors to Diu: inevitably the cheap availability of booze acts as a magnet for Indian drinkers. This only serves to add to the frontier image; wandering into a bar you're greeted by pairs of blurred brown eyes, tinged deep yellow by blood and hooded by sinking eyelids. At night the sound of drunken Indians singing is only matched by the sound of mangy dogs baying, often because they've been woken from their slumber by a pissed up Gujarati taking out his drunken frustrations on the local wildlife.

Restaurants open for breakfast are also open to Indians cracking into the local wine at 9am, while packs of westerners sit in the corner, marvelling at the alcoholic tendencies of the Gujaratis while nursing savage hangovers of their own. I even saw a man pass out in his seat at around midday and proceed to piss himself – and this in a fairly respectable place – as well as all manner of alcohol-induced fights, embarrassing displays of a total lack of control and a desire to get paralytic that I'd seen in Pondicherry, French Polynesia and anywhere else there are Asians and booze. westerners aren't much better, but it still seems that although westerners drink more, they don't typically behave like this, whereas most Indians I saw drinking couldn't resist acting the fool.

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Exploring Diu

I arrived in this outpost of colonialism and clandestine consumption during the most god-awful storm I'd encountered in India[57]. The rain drove into the bus,

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[57] I was to discover later that a cyclone had been approaching Gujarat from the south in the Arabian Sea for two or three days, and had decided to hit the mainland on the day I was travelling to Diu. It smashed the west coast of Gujarat, causing severe damage to roads, power lines, water supplies and life expectancy: in total over 1500 people would die, not as much as the official heat wave death toll of 2383, but still sizable. The cyclone would also cancel my plans to visit western Gujarat, the worst-hit area, which is fairly out of the way and challenging to travel even without the after-effects of screaming winds and flooding. It was a blessing that I was ignorant of the weather conditions when I left Palitana, or I might have not bothered with Diu at all.

Indeed, the cyclone in Gujarat was still turning up dead bodies a week after its departure, and although I wouldn't be sick enough to equate the corresponding physical deterioration of my travel possessions with an ecological and financial disaster, the temporal correlation can't be ignored.

As winds battered the west coast of Gujarat, they also battered my Palitana to Diu bus, which in turn battered my bags. Soon after my arrival in Diu my trusty old Walkman started to sound muffled, and my even trustier computer started ignoring certain keys. Armed with a Swiss Army knife and the confidence inspired by a lack of any other solutions I tackled both of them one humid afternoon.

Inside my Walkman a tiny screw had worked loose, detaching the playback head: it was the work of minutes to fix it back in, even though it still sounded terrible. My computer wasn't so easy: designed to be as compact as possible, the Acorn Pocket Book was also designed to explode when opened up by Swiss Army knife. I'd seen the insides before, and soon tracked down a ribbon cable that had worked loose from its socket, but in the meantime I'd managed to attract a fair old crowd of Indian onlookers, all of whom were either genuinely interested, or drunk enough to find the magnetism of a crowd interesting in its own right.

Even Jimmy Saville never managed to fix things in outermost Diu. And he never had a crowd of leering locals to contend with either. Do I get a knighthood too?

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pouring through windows without glass and leaking through riveted bus roofs, and even my umbrella proved scant protection inside the rattle-trap. *Chai* shops were flooded out, the whole state suffered from a power cut, and when I arrived in Diu late in the evening I couldn't see a thing. I wondered what I'd stumbled into.

Actually I'd stumbled into a wonderful oasis of beaches, colonial buildings and cheap alcohol, and although the latter was an attraction and made for some excellent late nights back at the hotel, I found the buildings to be the most interesting part. The beaches were reasonable, but with the tail end of the cyclone and the approaching monsoon, the sea was churning brown and totally unsuitable for swimming in, and to the Indians western sunbathers are like television: worth staring at for hours. If you want beach privacy, avoid India and go to Thailand.

The fortress, easily the most impressive Portuguese building in Diu, is perfect frontier material. Surrounded on three sides by severe cliffs falling into the sea and sheer walls built to withstand the biggest army the Gujaratis could muster, the earliest parts date from 1535, with a lot of the building being done between 1546 and 1650. These days it's uncomplainingly slipping into the sea, gradually mouldering in the tropical sun that seems as alien in this distinctly European building as the Portuguese themselves must

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have felt. If you ended up in Diu, you really were cut off from home.

Housing underground escape channels, cisterns, the Governor's Palace, a prison, barracks, state offices and churches, the fortress is a complete fortified city. Cannons litter the walls, cannon balls quietly crack in the sun, ancient stone carvings are scattered outside buildings in various states of decay, and from the turrets and bastions the view over Diu is evocative. The channel, at this turbulent time of year, is a sailor's nightmare, with spits of shifting sands and savage currents whirling round the headland. The fortress must have been impregnable back in its heyday, and now it's a deserted delight on the easternmost tip of the island. As fortresses go, Diu Fort is colonialism at its most paranoid.

Following the cliffs to the south of the fort, I began to understand just how easy to defend Diu must have been. The cliffs that line the southeastern coast are savagely beautiful with their pounding breakers spewing against overhangs and eerily moulded limestone formations. I was reminded of Victoria's coastline in Australia, but here the danger is not so much the cliffs as the sharp shelf of limestone sitting a few scant feet under the waves, waiting to smash the hull of any invading ship. The cliffs form a natural barrier, the double moat of the fortress a man-made equivalent.

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Nobody got in or out.

Diu's Churches

The cliffs are also home to a number of large caves dug into the ground, mines where the Portuguese cut out blocks of limestone with which to build their edifices. The fortress is just one of the colonial constructions on the island, most of the others being (of course) imposing churches. Three huge churches tower over the town's skyline, but only one of them is still used as a church, and that sparingly. Once again, it smacks of frontier colonialism.

St Paul's is monstrous, and its state of decay is almost endearing. Still decorated lovingly with lights and statues of Christ, Mary and various members of the heavenly host, the church is attached to the local school.

I wandered in and deposited some change in the donation box (something I tend to do in foreign Christian churches, though I don't really know why) and took a look around, and out the back I discovered one of the most interesting notices I've ever seen in a church: the local price list for services. Check out some of the following fees as set by Archbishop-Patriarch Raul Nicholau Gonsalves on April 1, 1994.

Church marriage	Rs50
Church Baptism	Rs20

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Blessing of a new house	Rs50
Blessing of a foundation stone, small chapels or crosses, vehicles, wells, nets, stakes	Rs20
Blessing of fields, new plants, corn, invocation against noxious animals etc.	Rs10
Pealing of bells (each)	Re1
Assistance at funeral service	Rs20
Any religious service at the grave	Rs5

And tucked away at the end is the following particularly Christian attitude: ‘The poor will always be exempted partially or fully from the stipulated offerings/fees.’

Upstairs in the church was the school, deserted in the late afternoon heat. At one end of a corridor was a classroom scene so perfectly colonial you could be forgiven for believing it was set up specially for tourists, as the blackboard pronounced its algebraic message over a collection of tidy wooden school desks. To find an active Christian church in a windswept corner of such a dangerously primitive Indian state was completely unexpected, but isn’t that the clichéd image of colonial education? It felt as archaic and obsolete as Calcutta’s Victoria Memorial or Melaka’s Stadhuys, and just as magical.

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More churches awaited discovery when I headed off on a bicycle ride into the heart of the island, accompanied by a friendly Frenchman called Michel. Diu island is long and thin[58], stretching west to east for about 14km, bloating to about 4km at its waist, and managing to rise to a maximum height of 29m above sea level, perfect for cycling. We explored Fudham Church (which holds one service per year, has no padre and is now a guest house inhabited by strange long-term travellers and humidity mould), Nagoa beach (where most of the Indian holidaymakers hang out, the men swimming in their skimpy trunks and the women sheltering and sweltering in their sarees) and various rocky coves and honeymoon spots. In the high season Diu must be quite the place to be, but I was glad it was the off-season: it would be harder to imagine Diu as a frontier town with hordes of local tourists wandering around.

World Cup fever also struck as the games took off in Paris, and nursing a sore pair of buttocks from the bicycle trip[59] I settled down to lose myself in the

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[58] This is quite unlike the inhabitants. Tourists and locals alike, everyone in Diu when I was there was fat. Beer bellies pushed shirt buttons to physical limits, sweat broke out quickly on even the most inactive brow, and fat middle-class bastards ploughed through bottles of whisky, wine and beer at a rate that only the obese or the dedicated can manage. People don't come to Diu to get fat; they come here to get fatter.

[59] 'No leak, no leak,' said the man as I pointed out that my bike had a flat rear tyre. He pumped it full of air and promised me that it would be

football, not so much because I like footy but because TV is simply fascinating after so long away from it. I watched France beat South Africa – memorable because the French coach was called A Jacquet and the South African coach P Troussier – and settled down into a lifestyle of relaxation and spirited drinking. It was frontier living at its best.

But as with all frontiers, you have to turn around and go back eventually, so on the night of Sunday 14th June I boarded the night bus for Ahmedabad, starting the long haul north back towards Delhi and flights home.

Lies, Damned Lies

Written: 15 June 1998

Visitors to India can't help but notice the Indian tendency to be economical with the truth. This is often because Indians, and Asians in general, want to please you by telling you what you want to hear (even if it's not the truth) – either that, or they're trying to sell you something, in which case their economy with the truth is simply an extension of the approach used by East

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fine, which I didn't believe for one second. Nine kilometres away from Diu town and I was rattling my teeth as all the air shot out of my back tyre. My buttocks weren't designed to have a loosely padded razor blade inserted between the cheeks and shaken around for an hour, and they hurt. Still, what can you expect from an Indian bicycle?

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London market stall owners. I've always found this constant fraudulence illogical enough to be bordering on the irresponsible, but the other day I realised that I've been doing exactly the same ever since I came across the concept of the census conversation.

From Indonesia to India I've had to put up with uninspiring but polite inquiries from the locals: sometimes excellent conversations ensue, sometimes they don't, but whatever the outcome, it's a fact of life, and it's churlish not to get involved. Like most facts of life on the road, the traveller learns to minimise hassle and maximise happiness, which in the case of pidgin parleying leads to more than a little bit of white lying. Here's a typical conversation I had on a bus in Gujarat (my lies are denoted by numbered footnotes):

'Hello, which country from you?'

'I'm from England.'

'Ah, England, beautiful country. Which city?'

'London[60].'

'First time India?'

'No, my fourth[61].'

'You like India, eh? Is good country?'

'Oh yes. The country is so big that the people are different everywhere you go, there's so much variety in

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[60] I live in London for simplicity. Every Indian has heard of London, some know Birmingham, but none have heard of Staffordshire.

[61] If it's your first visit and you happen to have fallen into a conversation with a con man, look out.

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the landscape from mountains to deserts to beaches, the food's amazing, the religions are so different from western ones, and the people are so friendly… I can't get enough. I love it[62].'

'You marry?'

'No.'

'Girlfriend?'

'Yes, back in London[63].'

'England, you play world cup football at moment. You like?'

'Yes, it's great[64]. But I prefer the cricket[65].'

'Cricket, yes! Mike Atherton, Graeme Hick, good players.'

'Not as good as Tendulkar, eh!'

'Yes. He is best. What is profession?'

'I am a journalist.'

'What you write?'

'I am a freelancer for magazines.'

'Which magazines?'

'Oh, various types. I used to work for the BBC[66].'

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[62] This is true, but I never mention the hassles of Agra, Fatehpur Sikri and Jaipur, *giardia*, volume levels or cow shit.

[63] I have no girlfriend, but saying I have one stops the buggers from trying to set me up with an Indian girl, or from enquiring too closely about what I think of Indian girls.

[64] I couldn't give a toss about football.

[65] And I couldn't give a toss about cricket, either. But if you don't like cricket in India, you might as well be a Pakistani for all the respect you get.

[66] True, I did work for the BBC, but this makes me sound like some big

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‘Ah. What is this here?’

‘A computer.’

‘How much it cost?’

‘I do not know. It was a present[67].’

‘Ah. You like this music?’

‘Er, it’s OK[68].’

‘You see any Indian films?’

‘Yes, one. *Dil to Pagal Hai*[69].’

‘Ah, *Dil to Pagal Hai*. Good’

‘Yes…’

And so on, *ad nauseam*… but at least they’re white lies.

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reporter, which I wasn’t. I use it to end the investigation into my past, because if you give a final answer to a question, the questions move on to a different subject.

[67] Everything I own I say is a present. If you tell the locals the real cost of a camera or computer, they’ll realise just how rich you are, which doesn’t really help anybody.

[68] Bus music is never OK, it’s always abysmal. But you can’t say that too often, because it’s needlessly offensive (a bit like the music, come to think of it).

[69] I’ve never seen any Hindi films, but I can’t admit that either. It makes Indians happy if you say you’ve experienced and enjoyed their culture, so why not make ’em happy?

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Rajasthan

Mt Abu

Written: 18 June 1998

It didn't take much for me to drop my plans to visit Bhuj and Junagadh in western Gujarat: the chaos from the cyclone had sparked fears of epidemic diseases (which were denied by the government) but whatever the risk of cholera, the electricity, water and transport infrastructures were buggered, and I could always come back another time. The journalist in me wanted to investigate; the traveller in me never wanted to see another bus ride like the last one. The traveller won hands down.

An overnight luxury bus from Diu to Ahmedabad and another bus bound for the north[70] saw me arrive in the hill station of Mt Abu on Monday 15th June. The monsoon was doing funny things this year – it leapt from being from five days behind schedule to being *ahead* of schedule in just 24 hours, jumping across half

[70] To underline that it's not just western tourists who get stung by travel agents and touts, I paid Rs150 for my luxury bus ticket, while one Indian tourist on the same bus paid Rs120, and another couple Rs160. If you're open for a scam, you'll get sucked in regardless of skin colour, it seems.

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the country in just one day having only dropped 45 per cent of the expected rain by this point. This in mind, I settled in to enjoy the relatively low humidity of the 1200m-high plateau of Mt Abu.

I'd only stopped at Mt Abu to break up the long journey north – yet another overnight bus ride would have blown my mind – but it turned out to be one of the best moves I'd made in a long time. Sufficiently off the tourist trail to be almost totally free of westerners, it is instead a haven for Indian tourists. Mt Abu is the honeymoon capital of Rajasthan, itself one of the most romantic states in India, and as a result it's fascinating to someone whose concept of marriage is totally different to the Indian one.

A Marriage Made in Mt Abu

It's obvious from the moment you step off the bus. Surrounding a small lake, just the right size for intimate boat rides at sunset, Mt Abu manages to combine a pleasantly cool temperature with a complete tourist set-up: ice cream stalls stand side by side with shops peddling sarees and Kashmiri trinkets[71], cute parks sit alongside piers hiring pedal-boats, and luxury hotels nudge shoulders with cheap guest houses, all vying for a

[71] Although not one but three shops, right there on the main street, sold a huge range of ancient but effective guns. No doubt they were for shotgun weddings and quick divorces.

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lucrative slice of the honeymoon market. And for once this tourist market is entirely Indian, and the differences between it and other more westernised tourist spots are interesting.

The first thing I noticed was not just the friendliness of the people, but the way in which they were friendly. In developing countries it's rare to feel that people are talking to you on an even keel: either they are slightly in awe of your western status, equating you with overseas luxury and the American dream, or they are middle class, in which case they tend simply to accept your existence and are interested in what you have to say, rather than fascinated by the simple fact that you're talking. Mt Abu is overwhelmingly in the latter category: the people I met were also tourists, on the same wavelength but simply in their own country rather than abroad, and as such, talking was easy. Conversation was from one tourist to another: nothing more, nothing less.

The general lack of westerners is one key to Mt Abu's success: from an Indian point of view it must be a tourist hell, but for me it was a great place to watch the Indians at play without having to screen out the impact of western tourism. And they're a funny bunch: no matter how long I travel round this country, I can't get my head round the Indians on holiday. Seemingly biologically attached to each other, you *never* see an

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Indian holidaying alone, they always come in huge groups, whether family or friends. Among Indian tourists, the universal reaction to the news that I was travelling alone was one of amazement, as if what I was doing was slightly sacrilegious: this attitude smacks of the Chinese and Japanese, and in a similar way Indians always take tours with others instead of hooning into the bush alone, they always take a guide at the attractions rather than getting a book and doing it at their own pace, and they even manage to take their honeymoons in huge groups. It's hard to imagine that happening back home… but then again, in India the concept of sex before marriage is total anathema, so the whole marriage thing is another world to start with.

It's a successful world though, if you throw away your preconceptions of what a marriage actually is. Indian marriages are, in the vast majority of cases, arranged: there are a few 'love marriages', but the fact that this category has its very own name indicates its rarity. People get married at fairly fixed times in their lives: it was a shock to the Indians to learn that I was 27 and unmarried. The fascination with western liberalism is as universal as the Gujarati fascination with alcohol, but the desire to enjoy the fruits of western marriage is surprisingly rare: yet again the American media is an influence. Divorce is almost totally unheard of in India, but it forms a staple ingredient in hundreds of western

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soap operas, along with infidelity and the scourge of AIDS. Generally Indian marriages last until one of the parties dies, because the marriage starts from nothing – an arrangement for social and business reasons, not love – and develops. And the vast majority of marriages develop into successful ones.

Of course, you can look at it another way. Most marriages work because the patriarchal society makes it so: the man is in charge, and he gets his way, end of story. Also, if society totally banishes and rejects divorcees, people are far less likely to get divorced: it is technically legal to divorce in India, but then again I once signed an agreement never to drive my cattle through the Bodleian Library in Oxford, which only goes to show that technical legalities are nonsense everywhere. I'll never know how successful Indian marriage is in terms of my definition of 'successful', but few people here complain. I had imagined that I would meet young people pouring scorn on the idea of marriage arrangement and wishing for western liberalisation, but I have yet to find someone who doesn't equate the West with marriage failure. I can't help wondering if they're right, with such a huge proportion of first time marriages in the West ending in divorce.

But these grisly thoughts are far from the minds of the happy couples strolling round picturesque Nakki

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Lake in central Mt Abu. As the sun sets over the lake, the people come out in their hundreds to have their photographs taken with the hills in the background: this being an Indian tourist spot, there are plenty of men standing around offering to take pictures for those who don't own cameras, and film shops rent cameras by the hour. It must be a lucrative business: honeymooners are hardly going to visit Mt Abu and not want some recorded memories, even if they're too poor to buy a camera, but you'd never see this in the West – it'd be as attractive a business proposition as a contract to sell fridges in Greenland.

And after the stroll it's back up the hill to buy an ice cream, a saree or a .44 while the rest of the family settles in for a severely big evening meal (though, to be fair, the people in Mt Abu weren't as half as obese as those in Diu), and then it's off to bed for the traditional honeymoon pursuits. But I couldn't help thinking what it must be like to have the clichéd First Night for real, a genuine consummation of marriage; if you could find a western couple for whom the First Night was a novelty, you'd be a clever bastard indeed, and besides, in our culture the thought of two people marrying without having spent time living together is, by my generation at least, frowned upon. How different these concepts that we both call marriage.

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The Summer Palace

My intentions in Mt Abu were physical but somewhat less romantic: I had an aching body and wanted to do nothing strenuous for a few days. I couldn't have picked a better spot because, according to my guidebook, there was precious little going on in Mt Abu, and that suited me fine. What I didn't realise was that the guidebook was utterly useless when it came to the reality of Mt Abu: it turned to be one of the highlights of my trip.

I did indeed spend my first two days doing next to nothing: writing letters, resting my aching toe (following the climb in Palitana), eating copious *masala dosas* in the local restaurants and ambling round the lake. My hotel, the Shree Ganesh, was so friendly and pleasant I nearly forgot I was in India (especially as I had satellite TV in my room, a bonus in a room costing Rs150 a night), and I revelled in the holiday atmosphere. Doing nothing was never so much fun, but I can't seem to do nothing for more than one day or my head explodes, so I decided that my foot would just have to suffer: Mt Abu had things to explore, and I was bloody well going to explore them.

Overlooking the lake is the Maharaja of Jaipur's old summer palace, a mouldering old building perched on top of a sheer granite hill. I wandered up there on the morning of Wednesday 17th June, just for the view, and soon found myself chatting to the caretaker. 'Want to

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come inside?' he asked.

'If it's possible,' I replied.

'Why not?' he said, and unable to think of a reason I followed him up to the roof.

'I sleep here every night,' he said, pointing to a beautifully constructed pavilion on the top of a tower, the highest point of the palace. Climbing to the top, I had a view of Mt Abu that was beautiful in the daytime, but which would be simply amazing at dawn and dusk.

'You sleep here?' I asked, unable to believe that a man with such a non-end job – looking after a building that's used for nothing and doesn't even see any tourists – could have such a stunning bedroom.

'Yes, every night,' he said, and winked. It wasn't just the shaggy beard and George Harrison hair that made him look happy, it was his eyes. I was to come across quite a few other intensely happy people in Mt Abu.

Brahma Kumaris

One of the reasons for this is the Brahma Kumaris Spiritual University, the headquarters of which are in Mt Abu. Purporting to combine all the religions of the world into one spiritual philosophy, this multinational collection of ashrams is totally funded by donations (evidently very large donations) and fills the streets of Mt Abu with white-clad people who are obviously quite

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at ease with life. I decided to float along to the centre's museum where the basics of their mission are explained, mainly because I'd never bothered to venture into an ashram, and this was the nearest I could get without risking my mental health.

It was a real groovy trip, man. It was, like, far out, know what I mean? Sitting alone in a theatre equipped with funky lasers and mellow soundtracks, I listened to a delightfully English accent tell me that if my life was getting me down, I could solve it all by getting into meditation. I found out that if the rat race was proving a burden, I could commune with the one true God and get into real salvation. And then I began to lose track of quite what was going on.

Perhaps the problem was that my life wasn't getting me down, and the rat race was proving nothing but a distant memory, but I still wanted to know what it was that had made these centres spring up all over the world, providing guidance to all sorts of nationalities and creeds. Unfortunately the woman's diatribe started to sink into the realm of sixties cliché, and that's when I realised that every cliché has to start somewhere, and I'd surely found a place that was responsible for some of the more embarrassing psychedelic buzz words. Meditation is cool, but it doesn't half make some people start spouting bollocks, and the Brahma Kumaris presentation was no exception. I had already met two

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kindly products of the university in the street who had practically begged me to drop by for a chat and to meet the only westerner currently studying there, an Australian painter called Dave; my idea of hell is something akin to being stuck in an ashram with an Australian painter called Dave, so I thanked them and managed to escape, but still the influence of Brahma Kumaris lived on in my visit to the museum.

Here's an example of what I discovered about the Meaning of Life. A big sign sits in the museum, proclaiming the following:

> *Puzzle of Life Solved*
>
> *All suffering is due to vices. Vices are due to ignorance. Ignorance can be removed by godly knowledge. Godly knowledge is imparted by God himself at the end of Iron Age (Kaliyuga). This is the end of Iron Age. Therefore, now you can attain supreme purity, peace and prosperity, which is your godfatherly birthright in the new Golden-aged world now being re-established. Now or never.*

What the buggery is that supposed to mean? If that one's a little too esoteric, try this one. On another wall in the museum is the following list of entries in God's

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curriculum vitae:

- *Who is God? Supreme father of all souls*
- *Name: Trimurti Shiva*
- *Form: Incorporeal point of light*
- *Abode: Infinite divine light (Brahmlok or Paramdham)*
- *Attributes: Purifier; Ocean of Knowledge; Bestower of Peace, Love, Happiness and Bliss; Almighty Authority*
- *Occupation: Re-establishes one original golden-aged deity religion after destruction of numerous iron-aged degraded religions of the world.*
- *Time of Descent: Confluence (Sangam) of the end of Iron Age and beginning of Golden Age (at the end of every Kalpa – one Kalpa is 5000 years)*

Whoa! So God is an incorporeal point of light, after all, and that's what students like Dave get into when they hang out doing raja yoga in their ashrams (of which there are over 4000 in over 60 countries, incidentally). It

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all starts to make sense now…

The Delwara Jain Temples

That's not what the Jains think, though: they're more into going round naked and avoiding the accidental murder of defenceless insects (or, at least, that's what the Digambara sect do: the less austere Shevetambara Jains wear white robes and aren't confined to monasteries, but they still believe in the same philosophies). But irrespective of whether you think God is an incorporeal point of light, a burning bush, a man on a cross or the culmination of a philosophy of enlightenment, you have to agree that the Delwara Jain Temples in northwestern Mt Abu are quite amazing. They are, without doubt, the most incredible temples I have ever seen, and that includes all the Taj Mahals and Mughal tombs you can muster.

The two main temples at Delwara are the Vimal Vasahi, dating from 1031, and which took 14 years to build by 1500 artisans and 1200 labourers; and the Luna Vasahi, dating from 1230, which if anything is even more impressive than its neighbour. There are three other temples, which are pleasant but nothing on these two, and as I wandered into the complex I bought a slim guidebook and marvelled at its wonderful Inglish descriptions of the temples. I wondered how the reality could live up to the documentation.

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‘The marble has yielded itself with a loving docility to fastidious chiselling,’ the book explained; ‘No description or drawing can convey an adequate expression of the great beauty and the delicately carved compositions of human beings and animal effigies of the interior of the temples which need a keen approbation,’ warbled another breathtakingly long sentence; ‘One can imagine the wonderful execution with rough and rustic instruments of those days,’ it continued; and ‘The minute chiselling and adorned motifs are unequal [sic] and matchless; the profundity of sculptured splendour is beyond fitting description,’ it chimed. With the temples inspiring such exquisitely constructed prose I couldn’t wait to explore.

I wasn’t disappointed. Indeed, the marble carving of the Delwara Temples is quite simply astounding: the nearest description I can come up with is to imagine yourself miniaturised and put inside one of the most amazing ivory carvings you have ever seen, and even then it’s only an approximation. The perfection of detail is so intricate and well constructed that it is incredible to think that these carvings were being chipped out so many hundreds of years ago. The guidebook, overpoweringly effervescent though it was, had got it spot on.

The ceilings of the corridors surrounding the central shrines are the most amazing part. Every square inch is

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covered in geometric designs, many-armed gods and goddesses from the Hindu and Jain pantheons, scenes of everyday life, excerpts from the lives of the tirthankars (the prophets of the Jain religion) and so on; the sheer range of artistry is beyond imagination, and it is at this point that I have to say that to believe Delwara you have to see it. My descriptions would only serve to add verbosity to the above quotations: what can I say except, 'The profundity of sculptured splendour is beyond fitting description…'

Interestingly the Delwara Temples are the only temples I have visited where photography is totally forbidden. There is no camera charge because there are no cameras allowed, it's as simple as that. And for once I was pleased; not only did this save me reeling off an entire film trying to encompass the huge scale of intricacy I was witnessing, but it also saved me from discovering the hard way that it is impossible to record effectively such an immense work of art. No doubt the British archives contain some wonderful black and white pictures of the temples anyway, but that possibility aside the marble brilliance of Delwara lives only in the minds of those who have been there.

Unfortunately it seems impossible for Indians to appreciate such beauty quietly. Demonstrating the exuberance that makes the Taj Mahal a cattle market and the situation in Kashmir a veritable tinder box,

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guides literally yelled at their charges – groups of at least 50 people at a time – and shattered any atmosphere as surely as if they had stuck a jukebox in the corner and played 'Viva Las Vegas' on full volume. Luckily there were respites between the waves of sardine-cosy humans, but this being Mt Abu, bastion of Indian tourism, I had to take my time to discover the beautiful silences of the temples. Of course this exuberance had its silver lining, and I met plenty of very friendly Jains (all of whom seemed to have the same surname, Jain, in much the same way that most Sikhs are called Singh) who made up for all the cyclones their tirthankars could conjure up and throw at me.

Shanti Shankar

Leaving the temples I decided to climb a hill, as you do, and stocking up on Bisleri[72] I headed for the Shanti

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[72] Bisleri is to Indian mineral water what Microsoft is to computers: a big, bad corporation. Back in the days when the Indians were cottoning on to the fact that foreigners wanted pure bottled water instead of dodgy tap water, Bisleri became the instant market leader. It was so ubiquitous that people in India still refer to Bisleri instead of mineral water, much as the English hoover their carpets, Americans eat jello and hippies roll joints with rizlas. But the whole empire came crashing down when it was discovered that one Bisleri bottling plant had simply been shoving untreated tap water into bottles and flogging it, and the competition seized on the opportunity; these days there are more brands of water available in India than there are people, from common brands like Yes to less common brands like Bisil, Kingfisher, Euro, Bailley and so on. The story doesn't end there, though: while I was in India, a spelling mistake crept into the bottle-printing machine and created a national joke; Bisleri's slogan 'The sweet taste of purity' had been magically transformed into something very different. Whenever I bought Bisleri,

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Shikhar, a famous meditation spot overlooking the town. My guidebook proclaimed that it was ‘not advisable to come up here alone’, so I applied my Guidebook Theorem to the situation and headed straight for the track.

Shanti Shankar provided a beautiful view over the entire plateau, helped me to work up an appetite and provided a talking point as I joined Rich[73], an American I had met at the temples, for dinner. Coincidentally another American was sitting at the next table and he soon joined us; it was then that I discovered what must surely be the biggest challenge of all time.

This second American, whose name I never discovered, was in India with a group of fellow students from the University of Chicago, effectively there to learn Hindi. I was intrigued, not aware that America had any kind of cultural ties with India (though I had no reason to think that they didn’t exist), and when I discovered what his purpose was in learning Hindi, I choked on my Thums Up and got what can only be described as a masala nasal experience.

When I’d stopped coughing, he continued. ‘I’m a psych student,’ he said, abbreviating the study of the

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which was as little as possible, I would be buying ‘The sweat taste of purity’. Heads rolled, I am sure.

[73] A great name for an American travelling through the Third World, don’t you think? Then again, someone mentioned that my name is a type of European currency, so who am I to talk?

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brain to five succinct letters. ‘I want to learn Hindi so I can do some case studies on Indians and learn how they think and how their minds work.’

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing: I hadn’t come across this much idealism since John and Yoko sat naked in bed for a week. You might as well admit that your aim in life is to discover a black hole and to stick it in a glass display case on your desk: Hindi has a massive range of words that deal with emotions, some of which can only be described as thoroughly esoteric, and even without the communication challenge, the Indian psyche bears as much resemblance to the American psyche as *chapatis* do to hot dogs. I was full of admiration for this young man with the exuberance of youthful academia on his side, and I wondered if he’d ever read Forster’s description of the relationship between Dr Aziz and Fielding, a perfect encapsulation of the social gulf between the two cultures despite it being over sixty years old and from the Raj era. Somehow I didn’t think so.

Still smarting from my cola burn, I wished him well, wondering what he would discover. The thought kept me chuckling all the way to Jodhpur, a seven-hour bus ride to the north.

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Indian Television

Written: 15 June 1998

Hindi's a funny old language, but it's even funnier on Indian TV. Listening to it is like listening to any truly foreign language – it's a collection of gobbledygook with familiar emotion-linked intonations – but Hindi has the added oddity of having a large number of English words and phrases that have been adopted and incorporated as standard.

Television is a particularly good medium because the diction is fairly clear. Watching a soap opera one night on my hotel room's TV (a rare luxury, especially one that can get anything beyond the standard terrestrial channels) I heard the following phrases in just five minutes: 'Hello', 'That's right', 'I'm angry', 'Try to understand', 'I am sorry, I am really very, very sorry', 'Murder case' and 'Mrs Sahid, please!', all surrounded by unintelligible Hindi. The credits at the end were in English, and as they rolled up the screen the announcer gleefully introduced the next programme, the first in a brand new series for Indian television. It was a particularly hilarious sitcom, the subject of which was the life of an English suburban couple who decide to become self-sufficient.

That's right, I was there to witness the introduction of India to *The Good Life*, taking its place among *Heartbeat*, *Mind Your Language*, *'Allo 'Allo* and *Are*

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You Being Served? as classic English comedy being shown every night on Indian TV. Is it any wonder the Indian film industry is years behind the West, when Richard Briers is still considered funny? Goodness me…

Jodhpur

Written: 20 June 1998

Jodhpur isn't only famous for its trousers, it's home to one of the most staggering fortresses you will ever see. The Mehrangarh Fort dominates the city, sitting atop a 125m-high cliff-edged hill and catching the rising sun beautifully.

Not only that, my hotel, a beautiful 250-year-old haveli right in the centre of the city, was a classic of its type; a haveli is a traditional Rajasthani or Gujarati building, consisting of a number of floors based round a central courtyard. Most havelis used to be mansions; these days they're more likely to be hotels, offices or home to many families, but a good haveli manages to retain its atmosphere and makes for an interesting place to stay, especially if you can get one of the lower rooms, tucked away from the searing sun.

On my last day in town, having spent most of my time being entertained by Yogi and Babaji, I finally found enough time to visit the fort, my main reason for

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visiting Jodhpur in the first place. I was by no means the first person to visit the place; in 1899 Rudyard Kipling wrote of the fort:

> *The work of angels, fairies and giants… built by Titans and coloured by the morning sun… he who walks through it loses sense of being among buildings. It is as though he walked through mountain gorges…*

This might sound grandiose but Kipling doesn't overstate the immensity of the place. Huge walls sheer straight up from cliff edge, serrated battlements provide ample room for huge cannons and view-hungry tourists, and even though her eloquence was hardy that of Kipling's, Jackie Kennedy managed to sum up the fort with the wonderfully hyperbolic, 'The eighth wonder of the world!'

The Money Man

On my way through the winding streets leading up to the eighth wonder of the world, I met a man. As per usual we got talking, but it was obvious from the start that this man had done his homework even more thoroughly than most.

'What is your country?' he asked.

'England,' I replied.

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‘Ah, England. Prime Minister is Tony Blair.’

‘That’s right!’

‘Before that, John Major.’

‘Spot on.’

‘Before, Margaret Thatcher. Then James Callaghan. Then…’

And on he went, reciting the last few Prime Ministers backwards as if he were a kid in a history lesson. I had lost it at Thatcher: I was nine when she deposed whoever was before her, and I felt a little embarrassed to see that this guy knew more than me about British politics.

While we were talking, a little boy slid up and sat down. He looked at me and started a familiar conversation.

‘What is your country?’ he asked.

‘England,’ I replied.

‘Ah, England. Prime Minister is Tony Blair.’

‘Er, that’s right,’ I said, smelling a rat.

‘Before that, John Major. Before, Margaret Thatcher. Then James Callaghan. Then…’

‘OK, OK,’ I conceded, beaten again. I looked at the man who was beaming with pride.

‘My son,’ he said, and ruffled his boy’s hair affectionately.

‘I have a collection of money notes,’ said the boy, and when I launched into my well-rehearsed monologue

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of how I had no coins or notes from home because I had been away for so long, he broke in and said, ‘Just come and take a look, I don’t want to take any notes from you. Just come and look.’ And charmed by his excellent English, I padded behind him into his home.

His mother made me *chai* and I looked at his note collection. It was huge; ‘The biggest in Rajasthan,’ my new friend Awatar announced. There were notes from Slovenia, Yugoslavia, China, Vietnam, Argentina, America, Canada, Italy, Sweden, Bangladesh, Nepal, Cambodia, Singapore and plenty of other exotic locations… it was fascinating.

I asked him where on earth he had got all these notes, and he said ‘tourists’ in such a plaintive way that I found myself promising to send him a note from England, seeing as he had nothing from the UK in his collection (I hope he received the mint £1 note I sent, itself an oddity[74]). He was so pleased that I had to catch

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[74] Many thanks to Matt Kilsby, who left the following message on my Guestbook:

> *I’m currently travelling around India and have found your website really helpful and bloody funny as well!*
>
> *I’m currently sitting in an Internet café in some backstreet in Jodhpur (it’s all a bit of a maze, though). This morning a friend and I went up to the fort, and who should accost us on the street? ‘Prime Minister Tony Blair... etc.’ I knew what was coming next because I’d already read your section on Jodhpur. Lo and behold, out came the foreign note album and I must say that it’s a fantastic collection! I was also offered a two pound coin. Six years later the cute teenager is now a fully fledged Indian businessman.*

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myself as he moved into scam mode.

I mentioned I was going home in July, via Amsterdam, and his face lit up. ‘Maybe you can help me,’ he said. ‘I have a friend whose mother is very ill in hospital, and needs money. He has some Dutch money, and maybe you can buy it off him for rupees.’

I asked him why he didn’t just change it at the bank, and he said that only foreigners could do that, not Indians, but I wasn’t into it at all. I didn’t know the exchange rate and he was talking about quite a large amount, so I refused and instead found him proffering two pound coins.

‘I got these from tourists,’ he said, ‘but I do not collect coins. You can use these at home: do you want to change these?’

This time I took the bait. The coins were genuine, I offered him Rs60 per coin (an offer slightly to my advantage) and he went for it. Emboldened by his success, he started jabbering away until we found

---

As to the note that you sent him... there were two one-quid notes in his collection, one from Jersey and the second a Royal Bank of Scotland one. If either of those notes are yours, then they are sitting proudly in his album (can’t remember the page number unfortunately!).

Anyway, thanks again for this great site. Keep up the good work. I’m off to get lost in Jodhpur.

Thanks for letting me know, Matt. Unfortunately the note I sent to Awatar was from the Bank of England, so I guess it got lost in the post. Ah well, someone somewhere is a pound richer...

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ourselves on the subject of school, which was when he fished out a sealed clay pot with a coin-sized slit in it and gave me the usual blurb about collecting money to buy pens for the local school children, and would I like to donate? No, I said. He told me that Rs100 would buy five pens for the local school, which is an atrocious price for a pen (they're not that expensive in England) and I realised that if I didn't get out he would talk me out of all my worldly possessions and probably even more.

But what did I expect? This was Jodhpur, and the creed here was obviously salesmanship and money, as I'd been discovering. Awatar's note collection was evidently genuine and worth supporting, but even he couldn't avoid the vocational calling of the genetic con artist, despite his tender age of nearly 15. It wasn't malicious, it wasn't even a con – everything he suggested was fair and above board, just pushy – but I was a guest in his house, drinking his *chai*, offering to send him something for his collection, and still he couldn't resist trying to pull a fast one on the tourist. This is the sort of thing that leaves a slightly bad taste in my mouth, and it seemed Jodhpur had made subtle deception its *tour de force*.

The Fortress

I finally escaped to the fortress, where the man at the

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gate asked me where I was from, and when I told him he said, ‘Ah, England. Prime Minister is Tony Blair.’

Wandering through the main gate, the guides waiting to be hired called me over, asked me where I was from and proclaimed, ‘Ah, England. Capital is London, Prime Minister is Tony Blair.’

And when I waited to have my ticket ripped for entry into the museum, the turban-clad attendant asked me where I was from and politely told me that the Prime Minister of England was the one-and-only Mr Tony Blair. I felt quite exhausted.

But the fortress is certainly impressive, and the museum one of the better Maharaja’s museums around (though it still pales when compared with evidence of George’s kleptomania). There were beautiful palace buildings, shady courtyards, intricate stone lattice work and trademark Rajasthani rooms filled with mirrors and coloured glass (which managed to retain an air of taste, unlike Udaipur’s efforts). However, a lot of the fortress is closed to the public, so for my Rs50 entrance ticket and Rs50 camera permit I didn’t really feel I had got my money’s worth.

It was still excellent to visit, but again I felt a little aggrieved at pouring money into the Maharaja’s coffers when government-owned sites like Mandu and Bijapur charge fees between two and five rupees for unlimited access. Awatar’s father had also expressed disgust: with

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Indians only having to pay an Rs10 entrance fee, he felt it was unfair on foreigners when for things like train journeys and hotels there was no distinction between Indian and foreigner. I couldn't help feeling he was right.

There is one feature of the Mehrangarh Fort that is worth paying for, though. Standing on the battlements, the wind blows over the city and up the ramparts in such a way that you can hear all the noises of the city below you, as clearly as if you were standing in the streets yourself. Aldous Huxley, in one of his more pompously lyrical moments, wrote:

> *…from the bastions of the Jodhpur Fort one hears as the gods must hear from Olympus, the gods to whom each separate word uttered in the innumerably peopled world below, comes up distinct and individual to be recorded in the books of omniscience.*

If that's the case then I wouldn't like the job description of Recorder of the Books of Omniscience these days: to slip into the flowery English of a man famous for drug experiments and a strange first name, what I heard was a calamitous cacophony of chaos from crashing clutches to crowded chowks and clopping cows. I idly wondered if Huxley had ever been to the Golcumbaz, as Forster

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had: now *that* is a *real* ear on infinity.

And it's a darn sight cheaper, too.

Yogi and Babaji

Written: 20 June 1998

In reading the story of Yogi and Babaji, bear in mind that throughout the experience I had a song going through my head, namely Sheryl Crow's paean to kiss-and-tell journalism, 'The Book'. An excerpt:

> *Never again*
> *Would I see your face.*
> *You carry a pen and a paper*
> *And no time*
> *And no words you waste.*
> *You're a voyeur*
> *The worst kind of thief,*
> *To take what happened to us*
> *To write down everything that went on*
> *Between you and me.*

Is that me? Am I being a voyeur, stealing the (possibly) good intentions of two traders to provide me with interesting copy? I don't think I am, but judge for yourself. Personally, I don't think the following is so much 'kiss and tell' as 'get him pissed and sell'.

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I my trip I met plenty of locals whom I trusted implicitly. Pavan, the man I met on the train to Gwalior, is an example; we conversed on the train through politeness, he invited me out for a meal and insisted on paying, and I trusted him. I understand that his motives were pure in that he was interested in me and I was interested in him. Similarly I trusted Kiran, whom I also met on a train, because he was incredibly genuine and honest.

But my Jodhpur days did make me reconsider my blind trust, not because of a particularly negative experience, but because with some people in India (as in all countries, of course), you should only trust them as far as you can spit. Not being a habitual *pan* chewer, for me this is not very far.

Yogi to the Rescue

Let me tell you a story. On my arrival on June 18th in Jodhpur, the town that gives the trousers their name (though these days you'll see more jodhpurs in Gujarat than Rajasthan, as far as I could see) I decided to book my onward train ticket straight away, to avoid having to call on Louis to save the day again. Unfortunately the computers were down as I entered the building, and as a result I joined the 'Tourists and Freedom Fighters' queue for what might prove to be a long wait.

That is when Yogi introduced himself. Sporting a

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pockmarked face, a beer belly and a jaw line that can only be described as an investment paying dividends, he was instantly amiable in the same way as his cartoon namesake. He chatted away, leaving me to mutter the usual politely distant rubbish of ‘Really, how interesting, I see, is that right?’ while the computers continued to refuse to kick into gear. He told me he taught the sitar, which interested me, and I humoured him. He was pleasant enough, and claimed he didn’t meet many tourists out here in Jodhpur so he was very pleased to talk to me (though I would later discover that in the high season the Mehrangarh Fort gets 400 foreign visitors every day, a pretty high figure).

After nearly an hour of standing around waiting for the technology to catch up with the demand, a not unusual situation in India, I was visibly tiring. The bus journey from Mt Abu hadn’t been unpleasant, but seven hours on a bus is a long time whatever the road surface and Yogi could tell, so he offered to get my ticket for me. I would meet him later for a beer and some food, and I would pay him for the ticket then, and because the ticket has the price printed on it, and the price is directly related to the length of journey, it was impossible for him to rip me off. Grudgingly I accepted: I like to do my own dirty work, but the prospect of waiting for an Indian to hack into a PC network while the workers all sat around on an extended *chai* break filled me with

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something falling short of enthusiasm, so I acquiesced. Yogi would come and pick me up that night, and we'd go to his brother's place for a feed and a couple of beers.

So far so good, and indeed Yogi turned up spot on time on his moped, complete with the promised ticket. We drove to his brother's place because it is not permitted to drink alcohol in a room devoted to teaching music (this I had heard before), and ended up in a machine shop just round the corner from the railway station. In this shop was a ladder, and at the top of the ladder a trap door, which Yogi unlocked and pushed back. And before you could say, 'Open sesame!' we were in Aladdin's cave.

The small attic was chocka-block with, well, things. Garish Rajasthani puppets hung in one corner; shelves of metal cast models of Ganesh, Siva, Buddha and the rest of the boys filled another; a glass-topped counter filled with jewellery ran along one side; and a sign proclaiming that they preferred Visa hung next to another that said, 'We know you are trustworthy but we are forgetful, so please pay in cash.' Every well-honed scam-detection circuit clicked into place and I turned to Yogi and said, 'I am not interested in buying anything.'

'You are my friend,' he said. 'I already tell you my brother is in the export business, but we come here to drink some beer, have some food, not to sell. If you are interested, that is one thing, but there is no pressure. I

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promise you: you trust me?’

If there’s one thing I do not trust it is people who ask me if I trust them (as in ‘You trust me? I trust you…’); if there is one thing guaranteed to break a friendship, it is a constant querying of the status of the friendship (as in ‘You are my friend, no?’); if there is one thing that makes me suspicious, it is someone who is paranoid (as in ‘Why you ask all these questions? I tell you there is no pressure here’); if there is one thing that puts me on total alert, it is someone who takes me into their shop when a large part of our earlier conversation had been about how offensive I found the shop-touts in Jaipur and Agra. From the moment I entered the shop, I became a man out to avoid every scam in the book.

The problem is that after spending two days with Yogi and his brother Babaji, I still did not know if they were genuinely friendly or just out to get something from me. Because of this uncertainty I cannot say that I ever felt friendly with the two brothers in the way that I did with Pavan, but it is quite possible that they were indeed genuine and that all my doubts were the product of a cynical mind. See what you think…

Evening Shenanigans

That night, Thursday 18th June, I sat with Yogi, Babaji and a friend of theirs called, somewhat interestingly,

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Bob, and never let my guard down. In a pique of pleasantry I had bought a gift with me: my collection of ten cassettes had long lost its appeal and my Walkman had never really recovered from the bus ride to Diu, so I gave my tapes and stereo to Yogi; this sounds awfully generous, but I was about to ditch them on the next traveller I could find who wanted them, because they were bulky and low fidelity brings me down. It doesn't seem to affect the Indian aural sensibilities though (judging by the quality of, er, hi-fi here), and I figured that Yogi, as a music teacher, might appreciate the gift.

The cynic would say that this unexpected gift knocked the wind out of their prospects for selling me things; the empiricist would argue that there is no evidence for there being any kind of set-up and that my own paranoia had invented the whole thing. Whatever happened, the gift went down well. I felt contented and socially at ease as I supped on my beer.

We then came to the meal, of which we were to split the cost. No problem: four of us, a quarter each. So how did I end up putting Rs400 into the pot and getting one beer (Rs70, fixed price) and a quarter of two dishes and a couple of nan breads, a meal I could buy in its entirety for less than Rs150? The food was good, the beer was certainly strong, but was I being ripped off? And how come only two of us, Babaji and me, were paying? This was no four-way split.

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But I chipped in because they were being so pleasant, and because they assured me that the restaurant delivering the food was one of the best in Rajasthan (and just happened to be next door to the attic office). The cynic might say I was being easily milked for a few extra rupees – no, a lot of extra rupees – because they figured I might not know the real cost of food in India. The empiricist might say that the meal was indeed that price, and that being rich Brahmins (Babaji owned two cars, a house and a shop) they were used to spending large amounts of money on food, and assumed that as a westerner I would find it well within my budget.

I rolled with it. The beer was taking effect, the ambience was fascinating as my paranoia fought against my faith in the Indian people, and I didn't feel threatened at all. But things continued to get stranger and stranger, always suggesting a scam without necessarily coming to fruition. Was I being expertly worked and was simply proving too stubborn or too poor to con, or was it all a total figment of my imagination?

The next oddity happened when Babaji read my palm. Now telling me my stars is about as pointless as telling a Christian to have a good time in the Coliseum: I don't believe in the signs of the Zodiac, and I only read the stars in the paper if I've run out of news to digest. But out of politeness I feigned interest and submitted to

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scrutiny.

I have to say he did a thorough job. Out came the magnifying glasses, the tables of squiggles and symbols, and the generalised predictions about my past that were either obviously culled from my earlier conversation with Yogi (I had told him I lived in Birmingham, for geographical simplicity, and Babaji pronounced that I lived in a place beginning with B, which is untrue both for London and the place I'm actually from), general enough to be true of anyone ('You are happy', he told me, which was pretty obvious to anyone meeting me then), simply wrong (Babaji told me that I trust what people say too much, and this while I was constantly thinking how little I trusted these two characters), or obviously just what I wanted to hear (he told me that in two and a half years I would go travelling for at least nine months, a safe prediction and obviously in tune with my thinking at the time, but which also turned out not to be true). I was unconvinced, but in the spirit of forbearance I learned on *Zeke*, I made myself sound thrilled and interested. That was possibly a mistake.

My reading ended after I had discovered various uninspiring facts about myself: I was 'lucky', would make a large sum of money in the very near future, would not marry until 38 but would meet someone special soon… the usual bollocks that's designed to please and is therefore easy to believe if you are willing

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enough. But there was more: my lucky stone was a star ruby and I should wear it in a silver pendant shaped like a crescent moon. I don't wear jewellery – I hate it on me with a vengeance, in fact – but it just so happened that Babaji had one such pendant left, and perhaps I would like to see it.

I simply said that this was obviously a hard sell and I wasn't even interested, and that caused sulks the like of which I hadn't seen since my visits to primary schools in New Zealand. 'We are doing this for you, for your good luck,' they cried. 'You are friend, do you not trust us?' I said of course I did (lying my back teeth off) but that I wasn't going to buy jewellery. 'If you don't buy this stone,' said Babaji, 'it means you do not believe in anything I have told you.' And he let out an almighty sigh, one of resignation rather than of sorrow.

What do you do? I looked at the pendant, reiterated my stand on buying nothing, and left it at that. They shrugged, looked hurt and put the stone away. The cynic would say that this was an obvious scam, so obvious I should have been rolling around the floor in glee at having stumbled on such a rich source of stories. The empiricist would say that they genuinely believed in astrology, it being a fundamental part of Indian culture and a very serious part too, and that they were sincerely trying to help me with my luck. I simply didn't know which was true, but the decision was easy because they

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were talking around Rs500 for the pendant, a figure I would consider imprudent to invest in anything except a ticket out of Jodhpur or a very good book, neither of which were available in Babaji's shop.

You must understand that my scam-detection units were all aflutter by now, having detected a potential chink in the overt friendship exuding from the brothers. I tried not to get cynical, but whenever money was mentioned, I firmly said, 'No.' However the greatest scam of the lot cropped up not half an hour later, and I still don't know if I was being cast a line or given a real offer. The cynic would say this is the hallmark of the perfect con: the conned doesn't know he is being conned until far too late. The empiricist would say that business is business, and what Babaji told me made a kind of sense.

The Gem Scam

Some background information first. There is a classic scam operated by gem dealers, mainly in Agra and Jaipur, which makes use of the tourist's tax-free import allowance. Tourists from most western countries can import goods up to a certain value into their own country without paying import tax (when I was travelling the value for the UK was US$5200): this is a fact, and makes a lot of sense when you think of tourists buying gifts and souvenirs and bringing them home. The

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scam involves a gem dealer asking a tourist to import some stones for him, so the dealer saves paying the import tax, a portion of which goes to the tourist; all the gem dealer needs is a deposit from the tourist to cover the cost of the gems, and he will give an assurance that the tourist will be able to contact the dealer's partners in his home country, and they will buy the gems off him for much more than the deposit. So the tourist makes lots of money, and the dealer is happy because he makes a good sale.

Of course this is complete rubbish. The tourist effectively buys a bunch of worthless gems off the dealer, often paying amounts like US$2000 for them, and when he gets home he finds the contact details are a complete fiction and that his gems are worth a fraction of what he paid. It's a ridiculously obvious scam and one which even the lobotomised should have trouble getting sucked into, but on my trip I met at least two imbeciles who had fallen for it, and the stories abound of others stupid enough to give thousands of dollars to complete strangers. Then again, these are the sort of travellers who think that karma is what you get after taking a sedative, so who's counting?

So when Babaji mentioned my import allowance and how I could help him import gems into England tax free, I pissed myself laughing; I now saw that the part in my horoscope about me receiving a large sum of money

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in the next few months was simply a lead-in to this whole tax allowance set-up. I said that this was the most famous scam of them all, and that there was no way I would ever get involved, no way at all. He said that he would actually be posting the gems to me, and that all I would have to pay would be the registered and insured postage, but I looked at him and told him that if he was a real businessman selling the stuff in England, he would pay for absolutely everything, including a cut for me. He told me I had to speculate to accumulate, and I told him to drop the subject and, no, I didn't trust him any more. How could I?

They were horrified, or good actors. They had never heard of such a terrible scam, they said. They were shocked to hear that I thought they were out to rip me off, they said. They promised to drop the subject, they said, and after bringing it up twice more in the evening, they eventually did. The cynic might say that they realised I was too clued up for their plan to work. The empiricist might say that they really wanted to avoid paying tax and saw a way I could help: after all, Babaji was supposed to be visiting England in a few weeks' time.

Whatever the reality, the evening ended with a ride back to my hotel (with them kindly paying for a rickshaw to take me the last part home). I had arranged to meet Yogi at the railway reservation office at noon,

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and after a leisurely hangover-cure breakfast, I did just that. I was intrigued by my total uncertainty about the brothers, and I figured that if I took almost no money and no passport I would be safe: I had left all my documents behind in the hotel room the night before as a precaution, and I decided to stick to this plan to avoid heavy losses if they drugged my drink or took me down a dark alley (unfortunate accidents that happen to plenty of tourists in the backstreets of this dog-eat-dog world).

The Sitar Scam

The original plan for the day had been to take the bikes out to a Rajasthani village to show me some real Indian life, but it was far too hot to hit the desert for an hour's drive, so instead Yogi and I settled in for a beer and a chat. I learned some interesting things, such as the fact that Yogi drank Rs200-worth of beer every day, an explanation for his Ming-vase profile; but the most intriguing was his total lack of understanding of my finances. He seemed genuinely surprised that I was not a rich tourist, and perhaps he realised I meant it when we got onto the subject of the sitar.

After receiving my gift the previous day, Yogi had insisted that he give me a present in exchange: I was flattered. He said he wanted to give me a sitar: I was overwhelmed. This was great! A sitar! One of the most insane instruments in the world, for me? As a gift? What

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a champion.

But the subject of money cropped up again, this time in the guise of postage. He wanted me to pay half the postage, which sounded fair until I found out that he wanted Rs1800 for my half, or about US$45. I detected another possible scam, and so I told him I was on a really tight budget, especially this near the end of my trip, and could never afford that much money. OK, he said, we could send it by cheap sea mail, but I would still have to pay US$20. I said I simply couldn't, and seeing an opportunity to make my feelings known, I charged in with horns down.

I told Yogi that I had paid a huge amount for the meal the night before and felt ripped off. I told him that if I had a guest in my house in England, I would not expect him or her to pay a cent, unless they felt obliged to buy a round of drinks or to bring a gift. I told him I would never continually bring up the subject of money and buying items from the shop: this I would class as unforgivably crass and rude. I told him that I was interested in astrology, but I didn't believe, so there was no point in buying a stone for something that I went along with for the fun of it, especially if a big guilt trip was laid on me.

Eventually a compromise was reached. He would pay the postage, and when Babaji came to England a month after I was back, I would meet him and buy him a

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bunch of beers. This suited me fine: there I'd be on my home turf, and by then I'd also know if the sitar had actually arrived, in which case it would be only fair to buy the man more beers than even he could quaff.

The subject of the village trip then cropped up, seeing as the day was wearing on and the temperature dropping. I was interested until I heard it would cost me something like Rs200 in petrol, a ludicrous figure given the village's proximity and the average cost of petrol: once again I felt I was being offered interesting options, but only if I was willing to pay through the nose. I decided against the trip, and instead settled for a second beer. But the prospect of another expensive evening meal loomed, and I had to do something if I wasn't going to be swallowed up by these financial vultures.

I said I couldn't afford another meal, and that I would eat elsewhere and meet them later for a beer. This caused the usual offended demeanour, downcast eyes and drooping jaw line, but Yogi suggested a solution: we would visit a friend of his who lived on a nearby farm (yes, a farm in the middle of a city) and eat there for nothing; all I would have to do would be to bring the family a gift of sweets, and maybe buy the man of the house a beer. This was fine by me: farmer's families are poor, and besides, it sounded culturally intriguing. I accepted gratefully.

Meanwhile Babaji had returned, and immediately

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launched into the sort of psychological warfare that makes talking with certain Indians bear a striking resemblance to walking on broken glass. He asked me questions like, ‘Mark, what do you really think of me? Tell me the truth, now…’ And I answered truthfully in much the same way as I had with Yogi. So answer me this: how in hell’s name did I end up buying a tiger-eye stone from the bugger for Rs151 (an auspicious number, I was told)? It was my lucky stone, to be worn next to my skin for good luck, and on reflection it was his apparently total conviction that this stone would be really good for me that made me fork over the money. You see many Indians with arm bands containing their lucky stones, so I suppose I thought what the hell, it’s a cultural thing, but it’s possible that I bought it partly as a token of my appreciation of his sales technique, and partly to shut the fucker up. In the case of the latter it seemed to work, but the cynic would say I fell into the trap eventually, and that the sale had to happen sooner or later. The empiricist would say I didn’t have to buy anything, and hey, it’s a purchase with a story, isn’t it?

Urma’s Farm

That night Yogi, me and his farmer friend Urma hopped on the moped and span through the backstreets of night-time Jodhpur. This was fun: to give Yogi his dues he always drove slowly and carefully, an unusual trait in

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Asia, and we soon arrived at a sweet shop (where I bought a box of assorted sweets) and moved on to Urma's house.

House is the wrong word. Imagine a small block of land, maybe 20m by 20m, stuck in the middle of a suburban sprawl. This block of land had no buildings on it save a small mud and brick hut in one corner, and tall walls of housing blocks loomed on three sides, the fourth being protected from the chaos of the street by a tall fence. Filling half of the block was a small herd of huge buffalo and a couple of cows, the buffalo attached by nose rings to stakes driven into the ground; along one side of the wall ran a roof covering large blocks of dried grass feed, one corner contained a huge pile of dried buffalo shit, patted together so that the handprints were still clearly visible, and another side held a roof under which some more buffalo sat, viewing the proceedings with a detachment only available to those who can fill their spare time by eating their last meal all over again.

This was a milk farm. Urma, his mother Rupei and his sister Nirma pottered around, wide-eyed and reduced to giggling fits by the presence of this white stranger, and when I fished out my camera and took a bunch of shots in the fading light, they posed with their buffalo like people who had never posed for a camera in their lives before (which quite possibly the case). The instant I pointed the lens the smiles disappeared and they

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assumed the austere poses of Victorians, or people like George standing over dead tigers, and it made me wonder at this universal effect of photography: in the West we are so used to pictures that we tend to relax more in front of the lens, but here it was different. I promised to send them copies of the pictures, and made sure I did.

As the meal was being prepared – *chapatis* being fried in a pan over a roasting buffalo-shit fire – a goods truck pulled up and out poured a complete extended family: cousins, little children, uncles, the whole shooting match. Unintelligible conversation flew around me like smudges of mashed potato in a food fight, leaving me smiling in ignorance and wondering whether the discussion was about world politics, the state of the financial markets or the fact that the neighbour's son had run off with the niece of the cat's father's milkman's cow. I ate my plate of *chapatis* and fresh buffalo curd with ghee and glee, risked drinking the water (which would prove no problem) and thoroughly enjoyed the completely authentic atmosphere around me. Children marvelled at my funny language and funnier beard, old men tried their rusty English on me, and I sat on a charpoy staring at the scene as the sun disappeared and the night rolled in.

It was, as Yogi had said, a cheap and thoroughly wonderful experience. We celebrated with a final beer

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back at the shop, but surprise, surprise, I ended up forking out to cover Yogi's lack of financial solvency, and ended the night back at my hotel with my host owing me the princely sum of Rs85. This is not a lot of money, but this whole financial imbalance thing was beginning to wear me down.

Chance Meeting

The final chapter in this saga came the next day, my last day in Jodhpur, after I had visited the Mehrangarh Fort. Wandering back through the streets round the railway station, I saw Babaji wandering along and he spotted me straight away: Aussie bush hats aren't exactly common fare in India. I passed the time of day, asked him where he'd disappeared to last night, and he said, 'Oh, I was too hot, so I went home. Fancy a cold drink?' Too right I did, so we ducked into a *chai* shop for a couple of bottles of Pepsi. It was good to chat, and amazingly enough Yogi chose that moment to wander into the same *chai* shop, just as Babaji was telling me that he was on the way to one of his factories to get a ring made for another customer who was paying Rs7000 for a star ruby set in a silver ring. This was very good business for him in the off-season, and I congratulated him on his luck.

So how the hell did I end up paying for all the drinks? Babaji said he had no change, only a Rs100

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note, and before you know it I had shown him my hand and coughed up the dough. Why? This man was a rich bastard, and I was his guest. Am I a pushover?

Finally, I had arranged to meet both Yogi and Babaji at the railway station restaurant to say goodbye before I boarded my night train to Jaisalmer. I made sure I ate before I met them (to avoid any more financially draining food expenses) and turned up at the appointed time. Rather interestingly, they totally failed to turn up, leaving me sitting in the restaurant for a good two hours, free to enjoy peace of a sort. Babaji had said the lucky effect of my tiger-eye would be instant, but I didn't realise it would be fast enough to spare me the ordeal of entertaining the Dodgy Brothers before having to board my overnight train. Bloody marvellous stuff, this astrology, even if Yogi still owed me Rs85 at my time of departure, the shyster.

Incidentally, a couple of Australian guys I'd met in Udaipur and Diu, Luke and Cameron, had told me that after hanging around with a bunch of Indians for a few days, they'd needed an 'Indian-free week' to get over it. They were worn out by the constant social intrigues and petty offences they managed to cause, and decided to take a break. I hadn't understood what they meant at the time because all my Indian liaisons had been simply delightful, but as I got on the Jaisalmer train, I felt rather relieved to be escaping and totally understood the

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Aussies' sentiments.

Needless to say neither Babaji nor the sitar actually arrived. Perhaps they 'forgot'…

Jaisalmer

Written: 26 June 1998

Jaisalmer is right out there on the frontier with the Thar Desert. Go west from Jaisalmer for some 100km and you hit Pakistan, but by the time you get halfway you'll be detained or possibly even shot; the India-Pakistan border is hardly what you would call a relaxed part of the subcontinent. It certainly makes for an interesting area.

Perhaps it was the effect of the desert heat on the population, but I found most of the Jaisalmer locals to be either plonkers of the highest degree, sex maniacs, or both. It didn't take me long, however, to develop a defence mechanism to this potentially infuriating attitude of a town tainted by western tourism but reeling under the off-season: I just laughed at everybody. It worked, too.

I laughed at the man in the bank who claimed the foreign exchange counter was closed until the end of September, despite the fact that I had met plenty of people who had managed to change money there in the previous few days. I laughed at the man sitting in the

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entrance to a beautiful haveli who demanded Rs2 entrance fee, while just round the corner stood a sign saying, ‘Welcome to Patwon ki Haveli, no entry fee.’ I laughed at the man in another haveli who tried to sell me his tourist junk with the sales pitch, ‘Just buy something small, only Rs500 or Rs1000.’ I laughed at the rickshaw man who wanted to buy my hat, so I offered it to him for Rs10,000 (over ten times its western price) and he said, ‘OK, I go and get ten thousand rupees.’ I laughed at the restaurant owner who, having produced a huge menu of vegetarian food, proclaimed that he had no vegetables, couldn’t provide me with any type of Indian food, and could only manage fried rice. I laughed at the young man who threw me a peace sign from behind his mirrored shades and yelled from inside his cluster of idiot-dude friends, ‘Hey man, if you want to talk to me, have a conversation man, come over here.’ The big difference between Jaisalmer and a lot of other places was that here I was laughing *at* the people, not with them. Something wasn’t quite right.

There also seemed to be a fixation with sex in town, and of course it’s a well-known fact that all westerners have constant sex, so I came across some very strange comments. As I was walking into the fort one day, a little girl of maybe seven or eight came up to me and said, ‘You are very beautiful man, hello.’ Walking down the street with Veronique, a Belgian now living in New

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Zealand whom I had met on the train from Jodhpur, we were followed by a group of astoundingly ugly young men, one of whom went right up to her back and grinned to his idiot friends as he walked in sync with her, only a foot apart: I spotted it and acted the offended boyfriend, but to them it was just a game, not sexual harassment. On the bus out of Jaisalmer to Bikaner, the young conductor announced that the driver was married, slept in the same bed with his wife and had lots of sex with her, a factlet that I could have lived without knowing. And I met an American couple, Nick and Rebecca, who fuelled my theory with two stories of their own: they had been told by a local that it was important that they only had sex once a week ('Seven days, one fuck,' was how the locals put it, to which Nick rather swiftly replied, 'One day, seven fucks'); and one night they ended up with a local musician inside their hotel room, simulating sex on the bed with some rather embarrassing pelvic thrusts into a nearby pillow. It was getting rather worrisome.

But despite the procreational obsessions of what is hopefully a small minority of the locals, Jaisalmer is a beautiful city. It is dominated by a huge and wonderfully picturesque fort, certainly one of the most attractive in India, and surrounding the hill is a sandy-coloured town of winding streets and desert buildings, hiding among its twists and turns beautiful havelis, lakes

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with intricate temples, and a whole menagerie of farm animals from cows to goats to pigs to dogs to human beings. The inside of the fortress is even more intensely crowded, and is therefore even more fascinating, and once you've learned to avoid the slippery cow shit it's a delightfully mediaeval place to wander round.

Even if every now and then you have to laugh.

Pigs Over Jaisalmer

Written: 26 June 1998

Having escaped from Jodhpur with my travellers cheques intact, I took the night train to Jaisalmer and found myself a delightful room inside the walls of the fantastic fortress, a perfect place for a spot of writing (it's one way to avoid the overpowering heat of the midday desert sun). Enjoying the strong southerly wind blowing through my window and out of my door, I was suddenly jolted upright by a loud, heartfelt screaming. It didn't sound human, but it was obviously a distress call, amplified by the gusts as they blew headfirst into the battlements below and shot straight up into my penthouse.

I ran to my porthole and soon identified the source as a scuffle of dust clouds on the battlement slope. In Jaisalmer Fort the citadel walls stand on the top of an 80m-high sloping hill, so below the walls is a steep

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slope of scree that becomes vertical for its bottom 30 feet. This vertical bottom has been fortified by another wall, but there are no battlements here: if you were to be pushed off the citadel, you would fall from the battlements to the slope, roll down the hill and finally drop another 30 feet vertically down onto the plains (and no doubt plenty of marauders met their fate in exactly this way). It was from this slope that the noise was squealing.

The dust settled for a minute to show two dogs baiting a small piglet, no more than a foot-and-a-half from snout to springy tail. The dogs, one a patchwork of white and black and the other a dusty desert brown, had each got an end of the piglet and were throwing their heads to this side and that like a lion ripping flesh from a wildebeest. But the piglet was still very much alive and bellowing, and running to the rescue were two boys.

I wondered for a minute how two Indians, a nation of people not exactly renowned for their kindness to animals, were going to help the situation, but help they did. Armed with slings and handfuls of stones they drove the dogs off the piglet and spent a good few minutes keeping them at bay. The dogs, however, had tasted blood, and at every opportunity they would grab the piglet and run off with it hanging from their drooling mouths, the poor thing squealing for its life. Eventually the boys managed to get between the dogs and the

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piglet, and began the long process of guiding their injured animal friend along the top of the lower wall, towards the gentle slope at one end that led down to the road.

It was during this slow escape that disaster struck. One of the dogs, evidently the hungriest, had run back down the slope and was tearing towards the pig. One of the boys spotted it and lobbed a well-aimed stone at the bugger's flank, turning it away with a yelp, but the piglet hadn't seen the sling and it panicked. It ran here and there, trusting neither dog nor human, and didn't saw the vertical drop until it ran straight into oblivion.

Right there below my room, the piglet seemed to float for a minute. Weighed down by its oversized head, it tumbled in a perfect arc, landing flat on its back after a drop of some thirty feet, raising a cloud of dust as it hit with a dull thump. The boys didn't know what to do, and after throwing a few more rocks at the dogs in sheer frustration, they heeded the call of the injured and raced down to the roadside where the piglet lay twitching.

Hearing the shouts, a man came out of the house opposite, carrying a pail of water. His solution to the problem of a piglet with a broken back was to dump the contents of his pail over the poor beast's head, which shocked it back to life and up into a few unsteady steps before it lay down again. But it was obviously in a terminal state, and as the man gently poured a second

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bucket on the body, the boys' heads slowly bowed one by one, everyone avoiding each others' gaze.

The piglet was dead, an insignificant death in a country where millions of animals die every year. But this one seemed poignant, because it showed the Indians in a different light: whether the piglet was a pet, an animal to be fattened and slaughtered or just an innocent caught up in a dog-eat-pig world, those boys, unsuccessful though they were, were supporting the underdog. It made a change from seeing fat, rich Indians taunting monkeys chained up in cages, and it was good to see, despite the outcome.

One day all Indians might act like this. And pigs might fly.

Camel, One Previous Owner

Written: 25 June 1998

'Ello there sir. You look the sort of man who knows what he's looking for, if I may say so. Let me be the first to say that you've come to the right place: here at Old Nick's New and Second-Hand Camel Emporium we've got 'em all, from super-charged top-of-the-range to more affordable economy models.

Now what sort of camel were you looking for, sir? A new one perhaps? Let's see, your baby camel starts at 3 ft high, and all you have to do if to feed him cow's

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milk until he turns into one of the strapping young lads we've got over there. If you're looking at a nice adult camel, we've got 'em starting at seven thousand rupees and going all the way up to twenty thousand, depending on the strength and age of the model: I'm sure we can find something to suit your needs…

What's that? Running costs? Well, you'll get about 50km per day out of your average model, and all it requires in terms of daily consumables is 20kg of grass, which will cost you in the region of one hundred rupees, and between thirty and forty litres of water, depending on the weather. The beauty of your camel, though, is his ability to go for a week without any water at all, so he's great for the desert: if you don't put any water into him for more than a week, the one-year guarantee's null and void, but even the driest desert will have filling oases dotted about that you can get to in a week, believe you me.

Maintenance is simple: as long as you put in the food and water he'll look after himself, chewing the cud at any available moment and parking himself for the night without a problem. We recommend you tie your camel up for the night, just as a precaution, but if you do decide to let him wander then he won't run off, especially if you're good and regular with the feeding. I know what you're thinking: how on earth can something with all those joints and spindly legs not go wrong?

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Well, we get an average of 24 years out of each model, and I'm sure if you treat yours well he'll give you even more years of satisfactory motoring.

See those legs? Two joints and three parts to each one, a brilliant bit of engineering though I say so myself. Looking from the side you've got your front legs on the left that bend in a Z-shape, and you've got your back legs on the right that bend in an S-shape, and there are specially hardened pads of skin in the right places, the bits that rub against the ground when the camel's sitting. Give the 'sit' command and they fold up in a beautiful way, one that you wouldn't believe possible: the camel kneels on its front knees, then folds its back legs up, and finally tucks the rest of the front legs under its belly. You won't find a system so well designed outside of a Swiss Army knife, but try to explain it in a brochure and you'll see it's like trying to illustrate how a compact umbrella works to someone who's never seen rain.

At the bottom of your legs you've got your foot pads. No, they don't need replacing either, or shoeing like your horse, and they're good for all sorts of terrain. Look at him walking: they squash out like silicone breast implants, know what I mean sir? Beautiful work.

Not as beautiful as the face, though. Look at these lines: sleek, aerodynamic head with a long neck for reaching all those tasty neem leaves: did I mention that you can fill up for free by letting your camel find his

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own food? A nice optional extra is the set of long eyelashes that give your camel that extra bit of appeal, and along with the flapping ears I have to say that almost everyone chooses this option: a camel without pretty eyes is like a donkey without a tail, wouldn't you say so sir? What's that? No, you don't have to worry about your camel looking like a female: we only sell male camels for transport, because if you take a mixture of females and males out into the desert, the males will fight over the females, so we leave the females back at home, just like you do in your life, sir, if you'll pardon my mentioning your wife. And on that subject, you don't want to involve your camel with females without expert supervision, sir: with those legs, mating is a sight to behold, I can tell you! You just bring him in for his regular servicing as per usual…

No, he's not in a bad mood, he just looks like it. Your average camel is a happy, docile beast; he just looks like he's in a permanent sulk. It's the lower lip, sir, hanging down like that all the time like something's wrong. You look at the thing and all you can think of is Marvin the Paranoid Android or Eeyore the Donkey, but Terry Pratchett reckoned camels were the best mathematicians in the world, and Johnny Morris just loved them, so don't judge a book by his cover, sir. Besides, if your camel does develop a bit of an attitude, tie a rope between his two front legs and let him go off

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into the desert with a friend, and they'll wrestle it out of their systems. Yes, wrestle. Has to be seen to be believed! There they are like two lanky diplodocuses, wrestling. To start they cross their necks, just like swords in a sword fight, and then the fight's on. The idea is to hook your neck behind your opponent's front legs, forcing him to kneel down. There's lots of playful biting of food pads, necks and tails, and a heck of a lot of noise, but don't let that worry you sir, it's quite harmless. If you don't let them have a wrestle every now and then they might end up picking on someone else: I saw a camel try to pick up a goat in its mouth as a joke, but the goat didn't see the funny side, if you see what I mean.

Did I mention night-time? That's when your camel gets a lot of its cud chewing in: camels eat their food plenty of times, so don't be put off by the night-time noise. You'll hear farts, burps, rumbles and the regular clock-like side-to-side chewing of its huge teeth, and if you're sleeping close by it'll stink like a dodgy food disposal unit in a blocked sink. But after a while you'll find it comforting, and it'll be the nights that you're *not* with your camel that you'll have trouble sleeping.

So, can I put you down for one? Or would you like to take a test ride? There's no manual, but it's simplicity itself: steer with the nose-rope, and learn the commands for Stop, Sit, Stand and the speed controls. Easy, isn't it

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sir? I just know you're going to love it.

In fact, I've got one here that's just perfect for you. One previous owner, low mileage and a personality that makes John Major look positively hyperactive. Would you care to make a deposit now, or would you like to pay cash…?

The Thar Desert

Written: 25 June 1998

A lot of people quite rightly come to Jaisalmer for the fortress, and a lot of people come for the wonderful desert atmosphere, but it feels as if the majority of tourists come for the camel safaris on offer.

I was no exception, but visiting during the off-season proved to be a blessing. I'd met a friendly girl called Veronique on the Jodhpur train, and we were both interested in going on a safari, so we booked and waited to see if any more tourists would turn up. They didn't, and as a result we had a much more personal experience: with just the two of us plus two guides and three camels, it felt like a real adventure as we headed off into the stifling heat of the Thar Desert.

The group was four people and three camels strong. I was on Sukia, complete with a branded ship's anchor on his rear flank (a true ship of the desert), Veronique was on Lula, and our guides, Ali and Sagra, variously

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rode and pulled Gula. Ali, an only child Muslim (a rarity in this country of multiple-child families) was an interesting character: very clued up and with good English, he was an excellent tourist liaison between the older desert expert Sagra and us complete novices. He sang Urdu trail songs, showed us his tiny home village, and always looked spotless in his white shirt and *lungi*. Sagra, on the other hand, was a Rajasthani Hindu through and through, with his twirled moustache, bright yellow turban[75], holey shirt and well-loved dhoti. He spoke little English (most of his conversations were in the local language) and although he was a quiet man, when he spoke everyone shut up and listened to what he had to say. The chemistry between the two was magical: the young business expert and the old man of the desert.

Veronique was no stranger to the desert either. She and her husband (who once gave up his job as a journalist to study the subject of wine for a year, and is now export manager for one of New Zealand's top wineries) had toured southern Africa together, and she'd been on other trips there too, so luckily I wasn't in the presence of a dweeby indoors person. Not surprisingly, we clicked well. This was a good thing: life in the desert is hard. Your drinking water is always hot (which I found reminding me of good times in Australia); you

[75] A turban is just a piece of thin material, about 1m wide and around 5m long. As Public Enemy will tell you, it's all in the wrapping.

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sleep in the afternoon when the only thing that moves is the heat haze; the food is basic – *chapatis* and vegetable curry – but Sagra and Ali managed to create such variety out of so few ingredients that it was more than passable; pans are cleaned with sand and fires are made from sticks and cow shit; and you sleep on the sand dunes, a romantic idea but not quite the picnic one would expect. I thoroughly loved it.

Desert Life

As far as deserts go, the Thar is somewhere between the Sahara and the bush. There are dunes, but they don't stretch to the horizon: you can see bush beyond the dunes, but they're large enough to get a feel for the desert. The safari was for three days and two nights, both of which we spent sleeping under the stars, but I wanted to go for longer. Yet again the call of the desert was strong.

There were enough differences between the Thar and other deserts I have visited to make it a new experience. The landscape was dry and rugged, but there was a fair amount of greenery: it wasn't spinifex, but more like small, dry bushes. Trees dotted the horizon, but not just any trees: these were mushroom-shaped neem trees, the greenery stopping in a completely horizontal line some ten feet from the ground. I wondered how the science of genetics could explain that

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until I saw a camel munching at the green leaves: in the world of nature there's normally a good explanation for what at first appears to be an inexplicable wonder.

Unlike in Australia, where most of the life lives under the canopy (and is therefore very small), there was plenty of life in the Thar. I saw cows, camels, gazelles, goats, dogs, crows, beetles, lizards, desert foxes and, of course, lots of humans, but it was hard to see how anything could survive here in this arid land. I asked Ali if it rained much in the monsoon, to which he replied with a wry smile, 'It *is* the monsoon.' This didn't stop the locals from ploughing fields ready for planting wheat, millet and camel grass, though I failed to see how anything could grow out here; I watched a lone woman and her child chopping at clumps of grass with a hook-back spade, a poignant symbol of man versus the environment. This is where India meets Africa and the frontiers of the old Wild West.

The Dunes

But perhaps the most romantic and evocative aspect of the desert is the amazing sight of the dunes. We spent two nights sleeping on the gentle slopes of the dunes, an experience that is unforgettable not just for the thrill of the outdoors, but because it is far from the idyllic image it suggests. If the wind is blowing you wake up with sand in your mouth, sand in your eyes, sand in your

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nose, sand in your ears, sand in your hair, sand in your toes, sand in your crotch, sand in your armpits, sand in your fingernails and, after you've eaten, sand in your stomach. And sand isn't the soft surface you'd expect from experiences down on the beach: sand is just hard rock in little bits, and after a few hours of tossing and turning on a dune, you find that it's just a comfortable. But the stars are unforgettable – as are the satellites: for the first time I saw two in the sky at one time – and drifting off to sleep under the whole universe is a sight to behold. One night I woke up to see the silhouette of my camel against the starry horizon, and I couldn't help but start: this was a scene straight out of the books of Joan Aiken (and specifically the illustrations of Jan Pienkowski), a classic silhouetted scene of the type I grew up with in my imagination, and here it was, in the flesh. After an experience like that, it's a wonderful feeling to wake up to a cup of sweet *chai* and a pale blue sky, with Mercury rising and the mercury rising.

The dunes aren't just piles of sand, though: they're alive. When the morning breeze skirts the gentle slopes of the dunes, they shimmer with waves that make everything churned out by Hollywood special effect teams pale in comparison. It is as if the dunes are pulsating with a kind of life, much as the plains do later when the heat stirs up the air and makes trees, scrub and horizon waver in the haze. The whole dune system is

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made up of shifting sands, an impermanent collection of tiny particles piling up, collapsing and slowly eking across the desert in the direction of the prevailing winds, and it is in this sense that the dunes are truly alive. Like the camel trains and animal herds, the dunes are desert travellers, just in a different time scale.

More than once I thought of Thorung La, the snow fields on top of the world. There the wind blows streams of frozen water off peaks and into the deep blue sky, and drifts of snow pile up over ragged mountain summits in a constantly changing landscape. And like the snow of Thorung La, the sand of the Thar Desert sucks in all sound, muffling footsteps and creating a silence that is beyond pure absence of noise: you can hear your own body pumping, wheezing and gurgling, and all around the world is in golden silence.

It might be silent when the sun is baking the land, but there's always plenty going on. You won't see much wildlife in the severe heat of the midday scorch, but just look down and you'll see the evidence of the desert's huge variety of inhabitants.

There is the Pac-Man trail of the camel, a collection of croquette-shaped green turds in its wake; winding in and out of the dune bushes are squiggly lines made by the tail of a lizard scampering over the hot sand; hopping from foot to foot between the squiggles are the forked footprints of a desert crow; back on the path are

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hoof marks and the characteristic pat of a cow; scampering in the opposite direction are the cloven prints of a herd of goats, littering the ground in their wake with their bubble shit; following behind are the characteristic marks of two bare-footed humans, the prints deep into the sand from the weight of the water jugs balanced on their heads; and finally there is a slight movement among all the faeces as a dung beetle rolls a camel turd over and over, heading towards some secret shit-hole.

Desert Villages

More obvious signs of life dominate the far horizon: villages, dotted throughout the area, are easily spotted in this flat landscape. In this area, some 60km from the Pakistan border, the villages are mainly mixed caste, with all the Hindu castes living together with Muslims in one place. These villages vary. In the middle of the desert the people are simply stunned to see you: one day I eschewed the midday nap and followed Noel Coward's advice, wandering off into the barren wasteland for an after-lunch stroll. As I emerged out of the heat haze like Clint Eastwood in *High Plains Drifter* and entered a lonely four-house village in the middle of nowhere, people came out of their front doors and stared as if I was a visitor from another planet, which in a sense I was: the desert is like nowhere else on earth, an

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inhospitable land made bearable by the construction of mud huts and wells. Some villages have water fed to them by pipelines, some have dug very deep wells to the waterline, and some even have the water flown in by aeroplane, but whatever the source, it's the water that provides a grip on the environment.

The buildings vary, though, as you get closer to civilisation, as does the attitude of the inhabitants. As we clomped slowly in the direction of the main road, the children became more tourist-aware, asking for pens and chocolate instead of just standing open-mouthed, and the mud huts morphed into ugly breeze-block monstrosities. Although the mud hut is much cooler than a stifling brick house, the brick house has a higher cost and therefore a higher status, so if you can afford it, you go for bricks. This attitude isn't confined to the desert: in Europe, we look upon stately homes as the ultimate luxury accommodation, but in reality they are a bastard to heat in the winter, a nightmare to clean, a pain to maintain, paint and keep free of rising damp, and a gardening challenge.

But stately homes have a high status, and most people living in council houses would dearly love to upgrade: it's the same for mud-hut dwellers when they see the blocky designs of modern brick houses, even if they look to a westerner like ghetto material. Desert building work is an on-going process and is as insane as

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elsewhere in India: even out here the schools have walls round their grounds, though logically that's a total waste of manpower and materials.

Towards the main road, too, modern life impinges. We were approached more than once by a an selling what he referred to as cold drinks, but which were, in fact, warm bottles of Pepsi, Teem and Mirinda. Pepsi has a firm grip on rural areas and Coca-Cola dominates in the cities, and it was nowhere more obvious than in the desert, where buildings displayed large painted Pepsi logos on their walls, clashing with the pastel colours of the surrounding desert. But that didn't mean the people were modern: they marvelled at my penknife (which was much better than Sagra's blunt effort), inflatable pillow, eye shades, compass, collapsible cutlery set, bottle holder, sunglasses and even my cheap Indonesian sandals. But just as I thought I'd discovered one area where the West had no influence, the clock struck twelve and a chorus of digital watches bleeped to announce the turning of the hour.

Even out here, this was still India, with all its trappings.

Bikaner

Written: 27 June 1998

With my camel safari completed, I headed east to the

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town of Bikaner. I'd decided to stop here on the unavoidably convoluted way to Amritsar, and reading about it, it had sounded like a fun place to visit. In the event, Bikaner itself was overshadowed by the Karni Mata Temple in nearby Deshnok, which is one of the most astounding sights I've ever seen. A 30km bus ride out of town, the Karni Mata Temple is, on the face of it, just another Hindu temple, but go inside and it's a scream. Literally.

In this country of animal worshippers, it's obvious why some animals are holy. The cow gives milk, an incredibly useful product; the monkey makes for good stories; the elephant and tiger are wild, mighty and graceful; and the swan, *garuda* and others are slightly mysterious and look great in pictures and carvings. Indeed, worshipping animals has always struck me as a great way to ensure that devotees live in harmony with nature, and that's a good thing, even if you aren't a believer in the religion itself. But the rat never struck me as a holy animal however hard I thought about it, and that's why Karni Mata is so intriguing.

The place is infested with rats, quite intentionally; the rats at Karni Mata are regarded as future incarnations of *sadhus* and mystics, which might explain the appearance of *sadhus* and mystics when they're human. Removing your shoes at the entrance to the temple isn't so much a mark of respect to the Hindu

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faith; it's a test of endurance that even Indiana Jones would have considered twice. Black rats scamper everywhere, crawling into holes, lapping up milk or water from the bowls put out for them, nibbling at *prasad* (food given as offerings) and sleeping in the shade of the marble walls. At first the sight is a little disturbing, but it soon becomes apparent that the rats are more scared of you than you are of them, and the scene melts from something out of a James Herbert novel into yet another interesting cultural event.

Before setting off for the temple, I got into a conversation with some shop owners in Bikaner who told me about the temple. Brandishing a small painting of the temple's Durga shrine, they pointed to the rats shown eating offerings on the steps; in the middle was a white rat, the only one, and they told me that just one white rat lived in the temple, and that it was a very special rat. If it looked at you it was very good luck, and if you touched it, it was even better. I thanked them for the information and headed off.

Imagine my amazement, then, when I wandered over to a corner where a small crowd had gathered round a pile of bricks, and discovered a white rat cowering inside the rubble. Hindus were bowing to the rat, holding their hands together in prayer and whispering to each other in excited tones. I sat around, fascinated that a rat could inspire such worship, and

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waited for something to happen.

Soon enough the people drifted away and the rat, sensing an escape opportunity, popped its head out and made a dash for it. I followed it slowly, tracking it down among a group of black rats, trying unsuccessfully to blend into the crowd. As I ambled closer it seemed to stop, sniff the air and sense something; then it fixed its beady eyes on mine for about ten seconds before breaking contact and getting back to the business of trying to merge into the crowd. Slightly surprised to find myself excited by this symbolic event, I shuffled forward slowly, and after a few minutes of slow footwork, I managed to reach out and stroke its back. By this stage a few Hindus had followed me, ostensibly to see what the funny white man was doing (a white man among black men being as interesting as a white rat among black rats), and started their prayers again. I snapped a picture and the white rat was gone, down a hole and away from the crowds.

My good luck didn't start immediately, if it started at all. I sat down to contemplate my good fortune, and instantly the one-rupee-one-pen crowd homed in and started their litany. It was hot and I wasn't really in the mood for this; the only sure-fire way to get rid of these kids is to pretend to lose your temper, but you can't do that in a temple, and all I wanted was a bit of peace in which to watch the rodent seekers do their bit. Instead I

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ended up with a bunch of kids who understood no English and who wouldn't take 'No' for an answer. The conversation went something like this.

'Name?'

'Mark.'

'Ah, Marr. Town name?'

'Birmingham.'

'Ah, Burma. Father's name?'

'Ian.'

'Ah, Ear. Brother's name?'

'Andrew.'

'Ah, Anroo. Uncle's name?'

'Which one?'

'Ah, Whichwun. Yes.'

At this point I gave up, found my shoes and the bus back to Bikaner, and went exploring the town itself. There's only so much you can do with the one-rupee-one-pen crowd in the heat of an Indian summer…

Exploring Bikaner

As the afternoon sun sweltered its way across the sky, I found time to visit the maharaja's fortress, and the old city bazaars with their windy streets. Unfortunately the Junagarh Fort cost a small fortune to enter, and then I could only go round in the company of a guide (who wanted *baksheesh* to show me all the rooms, which I paid in the vain hope that the 'hidden' rooms would be

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worth the effort, which they weren't); the upshot was that yet again I poured money into the coffers of some fat landlord who had quite justifiably been axed from his feudal position and who was now bleeding tourists instead of serfs. Every maharaja's palace I visit makes me love old George more and more; at least he had style.

But it wasn't Bikaner's fault that I didn't enjoy myself, it was mine. Yet again I came across a town fairly untainted by tourism[76], and yet again I found wonderfully friendly people who wanted to talk, swap addresses and shake my hand. The problem was that I wasn't in the mood; perhaps I was tired from my delayed and over-long ten-hour bus ride from Jaisalmer, or perhaps the heat of the plains was getting me down, but I felt totally uninspired and far from friendly. You can't inflict your moods on well-meaning and kind people, though, and it ended up as a strain. I even got invited into one particularly kind man's hotel room where he introduced me to his son, who was sitting his medical school entrance exams in Bikaner, and of whom he was incredibly proud; he lost no opportunity in singing his son's praises, fed me bananas and *chai*, and was eloquently fascinating. How can you be mean to

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[76] Though judging by the figures, Bikaner is on the up. In 1980, 1759 foreigners and 54,724 Indians visited the fort. In 1997 this had shot up to 21,809 foreigners and 158,180 Indians. It looks like Bikaner will soon change…

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people like that? I wasn't, but I found my energy rapidly draining away.

I felt like one does when one has a miserable night's sleep, a crappy day at work, a bad drive home and one has to attend a cocktail party one doesn't want to attend; the reaction then is to put on a brave face and explode at the end of the evening to your spouse, 'That's the last bloody charity/school reunion/golf club party you drag me along to.' Unfortunately I had no spouse at whom to let off steam, and instead I smiled my way onto the 1am train north.

Given my experience in Bikaner, I think the rat's luck took a while to kick in. One thing's for sure: I didn't feel particularly happy in Bikaner, but I certainly felt ratty.

Indian MTV

I did get to watch Indian MTV in Bikaner, though, and although it wasn't my first exposure to the green, white and orange striped MTV logo, it was still an eye-opener.

But perhaps the most interesting video wasn't a Hindi foot-stomper but a mellow, almost plaintive acoustic number from Scotland's finest, Del Amitri. Imagine my surprise when I found out that the group were responsible for the country's World Cup theme tune; surely not the same group whose last album before my departure was the aptly titled *Twisted*?

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On the other hand, the song title summed it up rather well. While most soccer theme tunes are along the lines of ‘We’re going to Wembley’ or ‘We’ll beat the whole world’, Del Amitri’s effort was Scottish to the core. The title? ‘Don’t come home too soon’. I found it a useful mantra while digging deep for the energy to get me north, to Amritsar.

Nuclear Testing

Written: 27 June 1998

One of the most common questions round northern Rajasthan was, of course, ‘What do you think of the nuclear tests?’ Regardless of my personal feelings on matters nuclear (which amount to an idealistic disgust at nuclear weapons, an intellectual fascination with sub-atomic physics and a realistic acknowledgement of modern science’s unavoidable existence in the modern world) I always answered in the positive, saying I thought it was fair enough that India had done its tests and that Pakistan had reacted with their own.

From a completely dispassionate viewpoint, the whole nuclear situation in the subcontinent is understandable. India and Pakistan are mortal enemies, and defence is a major concern: it wins elections, the BJP is exceedingly pro-Hindu and hence anti-Pakistan, and becoming a nuclear power would be so popular with

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the masses that it would rank alongside the Falklands as a serious vote winner. It's obvious why Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee went for it, and Pakistan's reaction was utterly predictable.

Arguments about the ideological idiocy of nuclear weapons testing don't cut much ice with the Indians, and I understand why. I also feel that the West's reaction – sanctions and widespread condemnation – is not only misunderstanding the political situation here, but is hypocritical in the extreme. In 1995 France blew up bombs in the South Pacific, and they weren't put under sanctions outside of the voluntary boycotts of French wine in Australia and New Zealand (the former country being the source of the uranium used in the tests in the first place). Nobody in their right mind would welcome more nuclear bombs into the world, but why alienate the country concerned when you're penalising them for something you've already done?

My reaction, therefore, is this: doing the tests was fair enough, but if either country actually uses the weapons conceived, that is completely unforgivable. The Indians I met generally agreed, but they didn't hold back when it came to Clinton: I met Americans who said they were referred to as 'the enemy' by locals, and there's no invective spared when Indians talk about the good old US of A. England, on the other hand, has come out of it well, for some reason, thought I know not why.

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But the man in the street knows bugger all here anyway. I passed through Pokaran, the site of the tests, on my way from Jaisalmer to Bikaner, and in both cities I discovered incredible ignorance. One young man in Bikaner, a medical student at the local college, claimed that the current heat wave was entirely due to the nuclear tests, and that in Jaisalmer the water had turned red because ‘atoms go into the water’ (but then again, he also told me that Hindi films were exactly like real life, so who’s to say he was sane?). This is simply uninformed and illogical, coming as it did from someone who studies elementary chemistry and physics as part of his course.

So perhaps the question should not be whether the nuclear tests are a good or a bad thing, but whether Indian democracy is effective. I trust the Indians, but I’m not sure I trust their government, and despite the free press and democratic semblance, a few fat and corrupt politicians in Delhi can play with atoms, bombs and buttons to their heart’s content. That’s the concern, but I can’t very well tell that to the locals, can I?

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Punjab

Amritsar

Written: 1 July 1998

As pupils in school history classes we barely touched upon colonialism, an amazing omission given the importance of the British Empire in the continuing arrogance of the English abroad; if we did study it, it was only to mention British successes (such as the Battle of Plassey, the explorations of Captain Cook and the glory of Hong Kong) or to paint a vivid picture of the hardships forced upon us by the conquest of the developing world (such as the Black Hole of Calcutta, the Zulu wars and the exploration of North America).

But the British abroad were hardly angels; one only has to read Orwell's *Burmese Days* to see a different side to the glory of Victorian England and her supposedly benign influence on her subject countries. I am constantly surprised by how biased my education was; I expect such a thing to happen in countries with oppressive and dictatorial regimes, but in Britain, the Land of Hope and Glory, the inventor of parliamentary democracy, the epitome of fairness and high morals? I've begun to explore the other side of the coin, and it's an ugly story. I was fed propaganda at school.

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It happens everywhere: CNN isn't neutral and unbiased, and nor is the BBC, but we like to think that they are (most people will get very heated if you question the 'correctness' of their news programmes). Nothing is neutral; I know this because I am a journalist, and as a journalist I know it's practically impossible to write something that's completely objective. But my religious education was a Christian education, and we never learned about any other religions, a major oversight that has thankfully been rectified in the modern curriculum; my history lessons were conveniently selective, even though history is supposed to teach us to learn from our mistakes; geography lessons were selective too, avoiding concepts of famine and ecology in favour of motorway names, county boundaries and the main products of Canadian territories. I know you can't teach everything, but you can at least *try* to teach a balanced syllabus.

So I have been discovering another side to life through my interest in colonialism. At school I never learned anything about Malaysia or British Borneo, but their histories are fascinating, and are a good example of petty squabbling between advanced nations, irrespective of the effect on the people originally living there. Australia and New Zealand opened up the worlds of the Aborigine and Maori, and Polynesia was a perfect example of colonial control that is both vindictive

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(nuclear testing) and beneficial (France pumping money into the country). I had to find out about this myself, and although it's been fascinating for me, it makes my education look worryingly incomplete.

Amritsar, the capital of the Punjab, is a perfect example. The Punjab is the home of the Sikhs, the easily recognised Indians who wear turbans, grow their hair and beards long, and who have set up very successful communities in places like Birmingham and the USA. The Punjab is now a peaceful state, but this is a recent development; until the early 1990s it was dangerous to travel here, and the region's history is a long story of armed struggle and bloodshed.

The Development of Sikhism

Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539) who was, reading between the lines, a genuine hippy. He looked at Islam and Hinduism, and although he liked certain aspects of both religions, he was a serious liberal and wholeheartedly rejected the caste system of Hinduism and the intolerance and sexism of Islam. The result was his creation of a new religion, Sikhism, which blended the good parts of Hinduism and Sufism (Islam's mystical branch) into a religion of tolerance and universal appeal. Nine more gurus followed Nanak, each building on the faith and forming a loose nation of Sikhs in the Punjab area, the spiritual centre of which was the

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Golden Temple in Amritsar.

This was all happening during the Mughal reign, and under the progressive Emperor Akbar and his successors, Sikhism flourished. But the last Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, was a fanatical Muslim and spent most of his time tearing down Hindu temples and building mosques – thus alienating his subjects and paving the way for the end of Muslim rule in India – and Sikhism was suddenly under fire from the ruling class. This coincided with the leadership of Guru Gobind Singh (1666-1708) who turned Sikhism around, creating a militaristic and highly organised sect that vigorously defended its right to exist and which elevated the concept of martyrdom to new heights. The result was a whole population of men who were honourable, valiant and seriously tough, characteristics that, one can argue, are still predominant in modern Sikh society.

With the demise of the Mughals and the advent of the comparatively tolerant British rule, the Sikhs expanded their empire. The Golden Temple, which had had a chequered history of being repeatedly captured by Muslims and subsequently recaptured by Sikhs, stayed in Sikh hands from 1767 onwards. By 1839, under Ranjit Singh, the Sikhs ruled the Punjab, Kashmir, Ladakh, Balistan, Gilgit, Hazara and the Peshawar Valley (in other words what is now northeastern India and northern Pakistan) and had pushed the Afghans

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right back to the Khyber Pass. Ranjit had agreed in 1809 not to intrude on British territory, in return for being left alone by the Brits, but his successors flaunted this agreement, and in 1846 and 1849 the British fought two bloody wars with the Sikhs, eventually winning, and the Sikh empire was incorporated into British India. The Sikh culture, though, was allowed to continue unharmed, and Sikhs were included in the British army, much like the Nepalese Gurkhas.

This bloody history is an important part of Sikhism, if only because it is the reason for their distinctive appearance. Being on the move all the time, the Sikhs were unable to waste time on beautification, a stylistic nicety which has stuck: the knife, or kirpan – which is always carried and is even exempted all over India in signs proclaiming, 'No weapons allowed, except for Sikh kirpans' – is an obvious symbol of armed struggle; and the traditional short trousers are worn instead of *lungis* because *lungis* are pretty useless if you need to run quickly over rough terrain. But surely the most impressive consequence of the Sikhs' armed past is the long history of martyrs, all of whom are revered like latter-day saints.

The Golden Temple, being the central Sikh shrine, has a whole gallery devoted to Sikh history and its martyrs. Occupying five rooms above the northern entrance to the temple, the museum consists of paintings

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of the key events in the history of Sikhism, and although it starts off with some pretty mellow historical scenes, it soon gives way to the violence and bloodshed that marks this particular struggle for religious freedom.

The first sign that something is up is a painting of a man being boiled alive, closely followed by another man being sawn in half from his head down. In each case it depicts a devotee being killed in the presence of his guru, but to me it wasn't initially clear if these pictures were showing religious persecution or an extreme test of bravery; what follows, however, puts one in no doubt that these are depictions of some of the more unpleasant ways in which Sikhs were killed by those of different religious persuasions (mainly Muslims) in a brutal attempt to convert them from their faith. There are pictures of Muslims butchering hundreds of Sikh babies, chopping off brave Sikh warriors' heads and, following on from these religious atrocities, a depiction of the 1919 massacre of an unarmed Sikh crowd by the British.

Of course, the museum is as biased as my own education. Nowhere are there bloody pictures of the savage atrocities and merciless slaughters perpetrated by the Sikhs as they expanded their empire into what is now northern Pakistan; there's no doubt that the Mughals, the British and the Indians all did plenty of horrific things, but you're not telling me that the Sikhs sat back and did nothing themselves. It is, after all, only

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a few years since there was peace in the Punjab, and today you still see photograph displays of Sikh extremists in bus and train stations, each of them holding a prisoner number in front of them and wearing a defiant expression. For some people, wars are never over.

But it's hard to imagine the Punjab as a war zone. The change of scenery from Rajasthan to the Punjab is stunning; from desolate arid desert I passed into a green and fertile land filled with fields of rice and wheat and criss-crossed by bulging rivers. The man next to me on the bus pointed out of the window and said, 'Is like England, yes?', and although I couldn't recall many paddy fields or palm trees in sunny Staffordshire, I could see what he meant. It was pure green; the Punjab produces 22 per cent of India's wheat and ten per cent of its rice, and it is home to the world's biggest bicycle manufacturer, Hero Bicycles. The Sikhs are masters of mechanics, and are renowned for their tolerance of other cultures and religions and their friendliness. This is not the product of terrorism, surely?

The Golden Temple

It's even harder to think of negative aspects of Sikhism when you visit the Golden Temple itself. A celebration of architecture, aesthetics, equality and piety, the Golden Temple is not only one of the most delightful

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temple complexes in India with its large tank and glittering gold and white marble buildings, but it's also one of the friendliest. In most Hindu and Muslim temples there's a slight feeling of intrusion; as a non-Hindu you can't go into a Hindu temple's inner sanctum, and you might not be allowed into a mosque at all, especially if you're female, but Sikhism makes a point of its tolerance. Anyone and everyone can visit the Golden Temple regardless of colour, caste or creed, and the four entrances surrounding the complex symbolise this freedom. It lends a relaxed atmosphere to the interior: you can go anywhere, see anything and the only 'price' to pay is to take off your shoes and cover your head. Would that all religions were so tolerant.

The temple itself is a stunning piece of architecture, an ancient structure rebuilt so many times after destruction and war that it combines the old and the new in a successful union. A huge square tank, filled to the brim with dark water and huge carp, is surrounded by buildings, all done out in white marble and gleaming in the sunshine. The walkway surrounding the tank is wide and, even in the direct sun, cool; and dotted throughout the complex are marble plaques and carved memorials to Sikhs who died in wars, Sikhs who want to be commemorated in their holiest shrine, and other plaques containing details of large donations. Every space has its value printed on it, from Rs500 to Rs50,000, and each

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one has a story to tell, from lists of dead soldiers to New York Sikhs announcing their departure for their heavenly abode.

In the middle of the tank is the Golden Temple itself, the Hari Mandir (literally ‘the Temple of God’). A long marble walkway leads to this square block of a building, whose lower walls are covered in inlaid flowers in patterns reminiscent of the Taj Mahal. The roof of the building, a melee of bulbous spires and domes, is totally smothered in gold, and manages to offset the marble quite beautifully in an architectural equivalent of milk and honey. It seems almost contradictory, but these garish whites and golds manage to give off a decidedly peaceful atmosphere: sitting round the edge of the lake watching the world go by is one of life’s more relaxing experiences, especially as, for some reason, you don’t tend to get interrupted quite as much as you do outside the temple (although other visitors will of course talk to you, they are polite in the extreme).

Throughout the day loudspeakers sound out the constant singing of the Sikhs’ bible, the *Adi Grantha*, and where the equivalent in a Hindu temple would probably be insanely lively, the *Adi Grantha* chanting is a glorious synthesis of styles. I’ve listened to plenty of Indian classical music, but I’ve rarely come across music as evocative as that in the Golden Temple: I kept

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thinking of Harrison's 'Within You and Without You', itself a mixture of western Beatles music and classical eastern sitar. A simple combination of keyboard, table and voice, I sat and listened for hours, marvelling at the complexity of a nation that can invent both wonderful classical music and infuriating pop.

The Golden Temple is a rich place, too. It's obvious when you look into the glass donation box, where people donate their spare change to contribute to the re-gilding of the temple's roof (most of which is being financed by donations from Birmingham's Sikh community). In one cursory glance I saw US$50, US$20, US$10, US$5 and US$1 notes, rupees from Pakistan, £20, £10 and £5 notes, German marks, gold rings, bracelets, earrings and a whole pile of large denomination Indian rupee bills. The buildings sparkled clean, the restoration work went on tirelessly, and the sense of community was tangible.

A lot of this is down to the Sikhs' no-nonsense attitude to communal living. Pilgrims get free accommodation in a number of buildings dotted around the temple, and the communal kitchen, the Guru Ka Langar, serves free food at intervals throughout the day. Sharing showers, sharing meals, sharing dormitories: all this was quite a change from the life of single hotel rooms, your own table in a restaurant and *en suite* bathrooms, and with the Sikhs being so friendly, there

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was no feeling of embarrassment or intrusion into personal space.

But even in this egalitarian society, we westerners were in an enclosure with good fans, lockable lockers, our own washing line and a guard or two at the door at all hours. Nobody could look in, so we could prance around in our underwear in the way that all westerners, of course, do, so in one important sense we weren't a part of the community, because we could get our seclusion whenever we wanted. But it felt good; genuine peace outside would have been impossible, and as for sleeping outside on concrete, even the hardiest westerner would have problems with that, regardless of it being free.

Surviving India

Written: 28 June 1998

One of the biggest mistakes you can make when visiting a country like India is to try to apply your own set of values to society. Hard though it seems to be for some westerners to believe, Indians don't live by our rules, they live by their own, and this is probably responsible for the most discord between travellers and Indians.

It is sometimes difficult to appreciate that you when land in a new country, your own set of values is irrelevant and simply not applicable. If there is one

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reason why the British failed to turn India into a duplication of Victorian England, it's because Victorian values were just not relevant to India: you might as well try to get a cricket fan interested in the footy scores. In India the things you'll notice the most are the different personal habits, a complete lack of personal space, the flexibility of truth, the sheer volume of life, and a totally bizarre concept of taste… and after a while, you'll start to *celebrate* the fact that things are not the same as back home. It's all a part of what makes India so enduringly fascinating, but everyone who visits has to go through the confusion of throwing out their preconceptions and starting again.

It's absolutely worth the effort though.

Personal Habits

The difference in personal habits between India and the West is quite obvious: in India there seems to be no taboo about spitting, coughing, farting, burping, pissing, shitting, picking your nose or even dying in public, but if a woman even thinks about showing an ounce of bare flesh below the waist, it's the height of indecency. When people eat in India they make as much noise as is humanly possible with one pair of molars and one swallowing mechanism, but showing any kind of man-woman affection in public is unacceptable (though men can hug and kiss men, and women can hug and kiss

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women). It's quite different from the West – in India, different things are acceptable.

Indians drop litter anywhere and everywhere, even if there is a bin nearby (in which case take a photo, because you won't see many bins in India). They burp loudly in public and nobody cares. They blow their noses straight onto the pavement, wipe their noses on their hands, and then wipe their hands on their clothes. They chew tobacco and betel nut mixtures, and spit the red goo anywhere they like. They cough and noisily bring up phlegm before spitting it out, wherever they are. But just because this is deemed rude in the West, it doesn't mean it's rude in India: it's just different.

If the strange personal habits get to you, consider this: how would you have turned out if you'd been brought up in a place like India? Probably exactly the same…

Personal Space

Personal space is a concept that has never been allowed to develop in India. When you have approaching one billion people rubbing shoulders in a country this size, you have two options. The first one, the western choice, is to bury yourself in your newspaper on the train, and to steadfastly ignore other humans when you're walking along the street, creating a concept of personal space that is sacred, unbreachable and almost solid enough to

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touch. The apocryphal story goes that a couple was having sex on a British train in a crowded carriage of six, but everybody pretended not to notice, looking away as the shrieks of joy throbbed round the train; but when the loving couple had finished and lit up a post-coital cigarette, one of the passengers leaned forward and said, ‘Excuse me, would you mind putting that out? This is a no smoking coach.’ True or untrue, the very fact that this story is an urban myth demonstrates that the concept of personal space is ingrained into western society, and particularly British society.

But India has no such concept. This manifests itself in a number of ways, but the two most obvious to the visitor are those of staring and conversation starting. Wherever you go you will be stared at, sometimes for hours, sometimes just for a short time, but each stare is penetrating, intense and profoundly unnerving. And as you sit there minding your own business, people will come right up to you, look over your shoulder and stare at what you are reading or writing, oblivious to any concerns for privacy you might have. Often they will come up and start a conversation, just like that, even if you are already talking: it’s not uncommon in Anglo-Indian conversations for the Indian to interrupt when he loses interest in what you’re saying, or has lost the thread through the language barrier.

You will encounter this sort of thing a *lot* if you’re

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an obvious tourist and off the beaten track, but how surprising is this? westerners are conditioned to know about the world from international TV and holidaying abroad, but this is far from the case in poverty-struck India. I'm sure I'd stare if I saw something as strange as a differently coloured person if I hadn't been exposed to them through media, immigration and an ability to explore the world. Staring isn't rude, it's just the locals displaying an interest, but to those of us conditioned not to stare as kids, it takes some getting used to.

It's not just personal, though. India manages to shatter any concepts of generalised privacy by blaring music at high volumes on buses, by cramming you into a bus or train until the sides are splitting, or by forcing you to piss in public through a lack of public toilets (something which is far more of a problem for women than men). I once sat on a train for hours while one man played Hindi film music at full volume on his ghetto blaster; I was cringing and inserting the ear plugs, but nobody else batted an eyelid. If they hated it, they didn't show it, perhaps reflecting that if they'd wanted to play their own music, they could too, and criticising the young man would amount to an invasion of his privacy. Who knows? Whatever, to the westerner this loud abuse of everyone else's personal space appears invasive and amazingly rude, but when there are this many people, what other solution is there? A nation this big full of

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people with British reserve would be too depressing to contemplate…

Searching for the Truth

In India, it often appears that ‘truth’ isn’t absolute, it’s analogue: ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ are just part of a whole family of truth values that includes ‘It’s possible’, ‘If you like’ and the famous head wobble. No wonder tourists get confused when they travel here: even the concept of basic communication has been altered by Indian society.

For example, in Ajanta Ian tried to find a Pepsi, and despite constant claims by various vendors that they indeed had cold Pepsi, none of them actually managed to produce one that was chilled. ‘We have Thums Up,’ they invariably said once we’d parked ourselves in their café, but Thums Up wouldn’t do for Ian: it had to be Pepsi, but just like the Indonesians and, to a lesser extent, the Thais, some Indians are more than flexible with the truth if they think they can make a sale.

This is just one example of millions. Ask for the time of a bus, and you’ll get as many different answers as there are people. Ask if something is available in a restaurant, and the answer will be ‘yes’ until you actually try to order that something. And when I think of the number of times I’ve tried to get directions and have been told simultaneously by two people that the hotel is both in that direction *and* in totally the opposite

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direction…

But it's not that Indians lie more than anyone else, it's that they want to please you by telling you what you want to hear. If you want a Pepsi, they will tell you that they have one, because that is what you want to hear. If you ask if that is the direction to so-and-so, they'll nod, because that's what you want to hear. If you need to get to somewhere, it is 'possible', because that's what you want to hear. The fact that there's no Pepsi, you're going in totally the wrong way and there's no bus for two months because of the monsoon is quite irrelevant, at least as far as the head-wobbling masses are concerned: they have no idea that you'd be much happier if they told you the truth, because to them a negative answer will annoy you ('No, we don't have Pepsi, sir' 'Damn') so they don't tell the exact truth in order to avoid making you unhappy. It's their way of being kind.

So never ask, 'Do you have Pepsi?', instead ask, 'What soft drinks do you have?' Never say, 'Is this the right way to so-and-so?' say 'Where is so-and-so?' Don't try, 'Can I get to Indore from here?' try 'How do I get to Indore from here?' If your question expects a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer, beware, because the answer will almost always be 'yes', because that's what the Indians think you want to hear.

As another example, Ian was sitting in a café in

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Mamallapuram one day, and asked for ‘one Pepsi’ in his broad Yorkshire accent. The little man ran off without blinking an eyelid, and quite a time later he came back with a Pepsi bottle, wrapped up in a napkin. Ian felt the bottle and it was really quite hot, as if it had been standing in the sun all day; when he asked what it was, the little man replied, ‘It is warm Pepsi, just like you asked.’ In his eagerness to please, the waiter hadn’t even considered the fact that nobody would ever drink warm Pepsi; he just did what he thought the tourist wanted.

On top of this, often you will ask a question that the non-English speaking Indian will not understand, and with you going, ‘Is it there? Is it there?’ and pointing, he’ll just nod because he figures that that’s what you want to hear. So what do you expect?

Of course there are plenty of dodgy salesmen around, especially in the heavily tourist-influenced areas. But are you telling me that there aren’t people out to fleece you in the West? Of course not, and it’s no different here.

India is Loud

You might be forgiven for thinking that most Indians are deaf: everything is so loud that if deafness isn’t the cause of the din, it’ll soon enough be the effect.

India has to be the noisiest country I have ever experienced. Stereos only have one volume setting –

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LOUD – and Hindi music without distortion simply doesn't exist. Horns don't just blare; they make your ears bleed. And as for the music itself, regardless of the singing, those string sections are designed to cut through any din, right to the base of the spine.

But despite the traffic noise, shouting, singing, expectorating, piercing music and out-of-tune motorcycle engines, you can't buy earplugs in India. Indian workers use pneumatic drills without ear protection, because ear protection costs more than a replacement worker. Indian voices manage to slice through conversation without needing to shout: the men selling *chai* on the trains can be heard advertising their wares from three carriages off, and are guaranteed to wake you up every time you pull into a station. Horns don't just shake the earth; they come in a number of different tunes that will indelibly scar your eardrums. The buses come complete with deafening Hindi music played at full volume, drowning out even the grind of the gears and the smash of the ruined shock absorbers. And a traditional game played by travellers is 'I wonder what strange noise my room fan will make tonight?' It's not best game in the world.

And asking anyone to turn the music down will earn you a look of incredulity, as if you've just asked the driver if he can stop using the brakes. You could say he turns a deaf ear…

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A Different Taste

Indian taste is, well, *different*, and I'm not just talking about their pop music.

The clothes sported by so-called trendy Indians look amazingly out of date by western standards: even in the seventies these guys would have looked embarrassing. Indian role models are more like roly-poly models, with their porn-film moustaches and sadly phallic poses they strike for the camera, and even the gods aren't allowed to get away with austerity: the shrines you see on the taxi dashboards have flashing lights and garish silver and gold borders, a homage not only to Ganesh and Co., but to the kitsch religion of tacky plastic. India is an aesthete's nightmare.

However, look at the women: they have impeccable taste. From gorgeous sarees to delightful hairstyles to simple but effective jewellery, Indian women shame westerners into simplicity, so perhaps it's just the men who are responsible for making India such a wonderfully tasteless place. Whatever, it's loads of fun; you might not want to decorate your house like India, but in India it somehow feels just right.

Roll With It

All these frustrations with personal habits, personal space, truth and so on are simply down to a difference in social values. Most Indians don't mind the spitting,

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noisy eating, pissing and so on because they are not brought up with Victorian values being shoved down their throats: mothers don't scream, 'Don't eat with your mouth open and don't talk with your mouth full'; society doesn't turn up its nose if you hawk a greeny on the pavement; and policemen don't arrest you for urinating in the street. In the West we have managed to fill ourselves with values that, on the whole, I agree with, but this is a truism: I have no choice but to agree. I have been brought up to think that eating with your mouth open is rude, and as such seeing someone masticating with abandon can't help but annoy me; I sometimes feel jealous of the Indian who, not having been brought up with this imposed value, has no hang up about eating. The problem is mine, all mine, and it can only be isolated by going into a society where my values are all wrong.

Personal space is another huge frustration. I hate people staring at me: I cannot help but feel that it is rude. But here it isn't rude; it's totally acceptable to stare. Mothers don't chide children with 'It's rude to stare', often because they're too busy staring themselves. I sit there, silently fuming as yet another urchin sits down for his own private viewing of Traveller TV, and again it is *my* problem: I am imposing my values on a little boy who has a totally different outlook. He is not being rude, but I am being quite

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illogical.

It took six months in India to develop this insight, and six months to develop the tolerance to accept it not as something designed to annoy me, but as an integral and fascinating part of the Indian psyche. The tourist spots are awash with foreigners who don't appreciate the concept of Indian values, and who flaunt their bare legs in public, hug each other outside temples and complain constantly at the habits, personal invasions and outright lies that they perceive. But that's the key word: 'perceive'. If your perception of India is through western eyes, you'll never, ever understand, and not only that, life on the road will be very, very hard.

Perhaps this is why I laughed myself stupid when I met the American in Mt Abu who wanted to psychoanalyse India. To really do that, you'd have to be born here and to have your own personal values developed within Indian society… otherwise you'll always be an outsider. And how can anyone expect to travel in a different culture without some culture clashes? Precisely – celebrate the differences, rather than criticise, and you'll fall in love with India too.

Schrödinger's Cat

Written: 30 June 1998

One thing I find hard to tolerate in the long-term

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traveller is the sense of the past always being better than the present. I am constantly meeting people who harp on about how excellent Goa used to be before all the tourists arrived, and how Manali used to be just a couple of huts before the hotel builders turned up. It's faintly depressing, and makes me wonder why on earth these people keep coming back to places that have been 'destroyed'.

It's hypocrisy of the first degree. These people lament the coming of the backpacker age, harping back to the sixties and seventies when you had to drop out of society to get on the trail: these days easy air travel and a more relaxed attitude to the concept of 'career' means everybody with a little bit of motivation can hit the Asian trail, even if you don't want to hang around in an ashram and dig Ganesh. But who's responsible for the tourist invasion? It's the people who are at the forefront of the invasion, the vanguard of the tourist attack: the explorers. The nostalgia addicts rant at the *Lonely Planet*, blaming every spoiled place on their proliferation of the facts, but guess who started the *Lonely Planet*? Vanguard travellers…

I've even found myself falling into the trap. I hear people talk of Indonesia, and I project this nostalgia with comments like, 'The Togian Islands are beautiful now, but in a couple of years they'll be buggered' and 'Check out the Bada Valley, it's undiscovered now, but

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soon it'll have McDonald's restaurants and highways.' It's pretty dumb because if I really cared about these places I'd keep quiet, but how can you do that? If you see something special, you automatically want to tell people about it.

And in doing so you open it up for potential destruction. But what's the point in harping on about it? This is hardly a small world, is it?

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Himachal Pradesh and Delhi

Dharamsala

Written: 9 July 1998

Within two hours of arriving in Dharamsala I had booked into what seemed to be the only available room in town – a depressing pigsty, to be honest – and was sitting in a café on the outskirts of town listening to an astoundingly posh English accent spout the following:

'You know John Doe[77]? Well I definitely could have slept with him, you know. I was working in York at the Opera House, doing the Merchant of Venice, OK, and we just developed a kind of a connection, like. You know, he's not like an old man; he's really young at heart. Like once, yeah, he took me out in his convertible Mercedes, pulled out a spliff and I thought OK! That's cool! He said to me: "I would like to have sex with you", but there was no pressure, like, and it was fine with him that I didn't want to. He phoned me all the time… yeah, completely… but he wanted to go this way and I wanted to go that, I just wasn't interested, you know. But he's a very attractive man, a very charming

[77] I've changed the name to avoid libelling the man in question. The person being referred to was a successful pop singer from the late 1950s/early 1960s, and that's all I'm going to say…

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man, yeah.

‘Anyway are we going to get more spliff, or should we detox?’

The conversation went on to cover the actress’ career, her incredible vanity and her disparaging comments about all other actresses of stage and television. To witness such a display of self-love in a place devoted to the destruction of the ego and the proliferation of universal compassion was not just depressing, it confirmed what I’d been told to expect.

I had been warned by Paul, a clued-up and wonderfully cynical Aussie I’d met in Amritsar, that Dharamsala was a traveller hell, but I didn’t realise it extended to include John Doe’s harem. Everywhere I went were Americans following in the footsteps of Richard Gere and looking for enlightenment[78], and hippies wandering around with bare torsos (an offensive thing to do in India, let alone Tibetan India), vomit-coloured baggy trousers and idiot accessories. Conversations were dotted with the yuppie mantra of ‘Oh God, *really*’ and continued with discussions of the wonderful properties of Buddhism and the peacefulness of meditation. Nobody seemed to be caught up in the samsara of suffering here, but everyone was looking for salvation.

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[78] Be honest: if you can’t find enlightenment in the USA you’re not going to find it in the cafés of Dharamsala, are you?

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Talk about Tibet Inc.: Dharamsala is a total sell-out. I suppose it's not Dharamsala's fault, it's an obvious consequence of the trendy tourist invasion. One thing was certain: Dharamsala was about as far from India as I could imagine, with its combination of hill station climate, beautiful green mountains, Tibetan locals and tourist-pandering restaurants, hotels and shops. Where was the madness of India, the craziness that challenges your values, the insanity that makes the whole Indian travel experience a joy? They went the same way as Nepalese culture and Thai pride, down the tubes, and all the time young globetrotters were landing in Dharamsala, convinced that they were experiencing something genuine.

Take *Contact*, the local community newsletter. In its July 1998 issue (Issue 5, Volume 1) was the following piece (I have left in all spelling mistakes and grammatical niceties):

> *Take a piece of Dharamshala with you*
>
> *Now that you have visited this hilly region, so called 'Little Lhasa', capital of Tibetan diaspora, you have felt the mountains and the trees, cold rivulets of Bhagsunath, the chantings of the monks, the temples, the silent images of Buddhas, chupas and apron clad people – a society on the*

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verge transformation.

Your experience – your heart ensconsed in a bud, has loosened to a flower. You have deciphered the serene notes of the mountains and the clouds. Let not the memory fade away once back at your material world. Take along with you the audio and visual of the world you have just experienced. In your daily strife, do remember us, play the cassettes and feel the difference. You are not all alone…

[List of tapes and videos deleted]

Nice, eh: the genuine Tibetan experience in your living room, complete with stereo sound and Dolby noise reduction. Then again, this was from the same newsletter that had an article on 'elf immolation', and contained the following new-age bullshit in an article entitled 'Healing in Dharamsala' by the delightfully named Fleur Wood: 'Looking for a spot of Spontaneous Healing, Reiki, Aura Cleansing or Past Life Therapy? Well, you've come to the right town.' My stomach began to sink.

Escape to Bhagsu

Despite this image, I had decided to tackle Dharamsala

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for two reasons. First, I'd had enough of hot weather, the last cool winds I remembered being those of Darjeeling; and second, I thought it would be interesting to see just how idiotic westerners could be: being about to immerse myself back into the West, I figured it would be instructive and helpful to see if I could acclimatise myself back into western values. Besides, being a sarcastic bastard at heart, I rather thought I would enjoy hearing Yanks and Poms harp on about finding The Truth™.

What a shame that I couldn't take it. Instead of being able to sit back and just laugh at all the pretension, it drove me mad. These people were incredible. It was as if all the ashram arseholes had decided to descend on Dharamsala, but even the weirdest casualties I'd met in the rest of India weren't as pathetic as these Buddhist 'dudes', if only because someone who sticks themselves into a meditation programme for weeks in the middle of nowhere is sincere. I suspected the Dharamsala crowd were confusing sincerity with celebrity.

Luckily I managed to get out of Dharamsala and find a room in a local family's house in the nearby village of Bhagsu, and with its rustic simplicities, candle-lit bedrooms and genuine peace and quiet I felt relatively removed from the serious business of posing going on in town. I wanted to spend time here, but even

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one night in Dharamsala[79] itself was too much.

On the other hand, the further out you go, the further out the people become, and this can be even more disturbing: plastic ideals and trendy causes are one thing, but the real long-termers are possibly the most disturbing aspect of the whole sham. It worried me, especially, when I found a mirror: there I was, a long-haired beardy-weirdy, and I realised that if I met myself on the street, I'd assume I was a far-out space cadet hippy. But how can I emphasise the difference between me and some other long-termers I met in Dharamsala?

People stay in Dharamsala for weeks and often months. This is not only a result of the large number of monasteries around, but also of the easy availability of marijuana, and as a result there are quite a few people around who have lost their sense of reality. Now I'm the first to support the theory that reality is a fairly subjective concept, based more on our personal and societal value systems than a concrete specific, but on the other hand it's not hard to tell when someone has lost a part of their mind to drug abuse. In Bhagsu there were plenty of casualties.

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[79] The suburb where everyone stays is called McLeod Ganj, and is separate from Dharamsala itself. It's well named: if there's one thing McLeod Ganj is full of it's clouds of ganja.

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Very, Very Scary

The scariest was an English woman of 32 who was staying opposite me in my first village home: she was the main reason for my scooting further up the hill to find another farm cottage to hang out in. Normally sociable and interesting (if a little full of her own self-importance), Keeleigh proudly told me that she had been stoned every single day for eight years, and couldn't remember a day she hadn't spent smoking. As she puffed on her mixed opium-hashish joint, she changed from docile socialiser to agent provocateur. Nothing I did or said was acceptable: the fact that she had an incredible hatred of journalists and computers only managed to fuel her tangential rants against the modern world[80]. At one stage she was trying to explain how evil computers were and how disgusting it was that people used them to communicate with each other, but I was adamant that not only are computers simply a communication medium, but they have created a new arena of language and semantics with their lack of face-to-face contact, lack of sarcasm and tonal operators, and an almost forced use of semantics over implied contextual meaning. She wasn't having any of it.

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[80] One might assume that for one such as me who avidly worships the God of Sarcasm this was a perfect opportunity for me to jump in there and mercilessly take the piss out of Keeleigh's addled mind. Unfortunately there was nobody around to laugh along with me: that's when it gets scary, being stuck with a stoner who doesn't realise she's totally lost the plot.

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‘Look,’ I said, ‘you’re reading this magazine and it’s just another communication medium. The writer is communicating things to you by printing them on paper: it’s just dead wood.’

She looked at me with the sort of look one might reserve for convicted rapists or child abusers caught in the act: sheer hatred. ‘There is no such thing as *just dead wood*,’ she snarled. ‘When I see wood, it is never dead, even if it is chopped down. Wood has an energy, an aura that can never die.’

This tangent was getting somewhat off the subject, but that was a characteristic of talking to Keeleigh: she had no concept of conventional argument, hardly surprising when you consider that drugs destroy the whole concept of convention. I failed to mention that she’d managed to burn quite a bit of ‘aura’ in the fire that she’d used to make her *chai*, but instead tried to pull the thread back to the original argument.

‘Fair enough,’ I lied, ‘but don’t you see a computer is just a means of communicating? If you had been alive at the time of Caxton’s printing press, would you have been declaring it was heresy? Or would you approve of the ability to spread a message to the whole world?’

The look returned. ‘I cannot put my mind into that situation,’ she claimed. ‘How can I answer that?’ And turning back to her copy of *Cosmopolitan* she started to read the picture captions. I settled back into blissful

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apathy until a scream shattered the serenity.

‘Unbelievable! Just not now!’ yelled Keeleigh, turning to her friend Shayna and throwing her *Cosmo* onto the ground. She stomped off holding her head as if the evil nature of the whole world had been revealed to her. I glanced at the magazine: in an article on men dating women, drugging them, taking them home and raping them while they’re under the influence, was a caption talking about a man convicted for aiding and abetting such a rapist by procuring the drugs for him. He had learned how to create a suitable drug cocktail on the Internet, hence Keeleigh’s outburst.

When I saw Keeleigh again she had come down: at least, she was back to a relative normalcy. But it was too much: a symptom of Dharamsala and the long and winding road, Keeleigh represented everything I loathe about the hippy movement. I support the liberal idealism; I enjoy the personal freedom preached by the dropouts; I think it’s good to explore religions, philosophies and your own place in your own universe; but taking too many drugs is just dumb, because you lose everything you wanted to preserve. And if there’s a magnet for the fuckwits of the long-term trail, it’s places like Dharamsala.

It’s all a bit depressing. The majority of tourists in Dharamsala are either short-termers looking for the conveniently packaged spiritual-solution-cum-world-

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saving formula[81], or they're long-termers who have stayed put for too long and have begun to lose the point. I met people who had only been to Goa, Manali and Dharamsala, even after months in India. I marvelled at their staying power, before realising that a joint for breakfast makes such a life almost inevitable. How hollow.

Rain Stops Play

The monsoon finally caught up with me in Dharamsala. Wandering through the lush fields and down the Tibetan streets of McLeod Ganj and Bhagsu, the heavens would open with no warning and throw down water at a rate only unsurprising to those who go through such torrents every year. Clouds rolled in on my farmhouse, and every afternoon and evening I would retire to a safe haven to read, write and dream of going home.

I had originally planned to explore the hills round the luscious valleys, but India's varied cornucopia of intestinal inhabitants struck one last time: *giardia* gas suddenly appeared, I chugged down some Tinizadole,

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[81] Perhaps the seekers should heed the following section from Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*:

> *'When someone is seeking,' said Siddhartha, 'it happens quite easily that he only sees the thing that he is seeking; that he is unable to find anything, unable to absorb anything, because he is only thinking of the thing he is seeking, because he has a goal, because he is obsessed with his goal. Seeking means: to have a goal; but finding means: to be free, to be receptive, to have no goal.'*

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and settled in for my body to recover, a difficult proposition when the weather's cold and wet, the shower is freezing and the bed constantly damp. I slipped into the apathetic mode of the truly relaxed and did precious little except eat, sleep and socialise with friends from various places on the trail whom I bumped into unexpectedly: this was my main reason for hitting the hills in the first place, after all.

It doesn't make for a very interesting read, though, and soon enough I was heading downhill to Delhi.

The Dogs of Bhagsu

Written: 9 July 1998

Walking into Bhagsu, the suburb of Dharamsala where I was staying, I saw a sight. The three members of the local dog mafia – big, black bastards who had already terrorised the poor mutt living in our house on a number of occasions – were standing in formation, barking wildly at a cow. Two of them were standing back-to-back – butt-to-butt is probably a better terminology for quadrupeds – and the third was baring his teeth from behind this barrier, leaping at the cow whenever it lowered its horns to charge.

I stayed to watch, silently supporting the cow: after surviving Asia I have no compunction in saying that a mass slaughter of all dogs would be too kind. It was

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then I noticed that the dog's formation wasn't so much tactical as coital: the two dogs standing butt to butt were welded together at the base of the tail.

When dogs mate, the female grips the male's member with her vaginal muscles, otherwise he'd have no hope of finishing the act. This is a common procedure in animal mating rituals[82], and is all fine and dandy as long as you've got a nice undisturbed love nest in which to complete the process; if you're interrupted, however, it's a pain in the arse. These two dogs had obviously been going at it hammer and tongs in the middle of the road when the cow had decided it wanted to wander past them, and in a mouth-foaming display of territorial possession the dogs had reacted, the male leaping off his mate only to find that he was still inextricably attached.

The result was the canine equivalent of Dr Dolittle's Push-Me-Pull-Me. What made it even more bizarre was that the third dog, another male, was obviously quite turned on by his friends' convoluted constriction, and kept trying to mount the female with a predictable lack of success. Meanwhile the cow kept attacking, the dogs kept freaking out and scaring it away, and the poor lovers kept yelping louder and louder as their bizarre

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[82] Unless you're a camel, that is. Camels mate butt-to-butt, as the male has a backward-pointing penis. If you've ever seen a camel walking, you'll understand why they don't do it doggy style.

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love triangle stretched parts that simply don't stretch that far.

Finally the frustrated third dog decided he'd had enough of his friend blocking the tunnel of love and went for him with bared teeth and furious growls. This did the trick: scared shitless, the female managed to let go her fatal grip and limped off into the bushes to lick her injuries, leaving the bruised male to roll around on the ground, groaning the groan of any member of the male sex who has had his nether regions subjected to unwanted strain. The voyeur, however, was having none of this, and decided to pursue the argument with his sexual competitor, leaping onto the poor bastard and ripping at him with bared fangs while the released lover teetered between self-pity and self-defence.

Quietly watching from nearby, the cow soon spotted that the dogs were scattered and no longer united, so it attacked. Neatly scooping up the fighting males on its horns to the sound of scared yelps and extreme confusion, it turned on the bitch and routed the canine camp. The dogs, realising their position was helpless, ran for it, and obviously determined to ram home its dominance the cow chased after them, demonstrating once and for all that the image of the cow as a fat, lazy cud-chewer is hopelessly inaccurate. Momentum managed to carry it past the dogs at one point, scaring the shit out of the already badly frightened mutts, and

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before you knew it the whole melee had disappeared round the corner and Bhagsu was a peaceful little hamlet once more.

Except for the muted sniggering of the local dog population, that is.

Delhi

Written: 15 July 1998

Delhi reflects the schizophrenia of modern India perfectly. Split into New Delhi and Old Delhi, the capital manages to sum up everything that was futile about colonialism and everything that is chaotic about the Third World. New Delhi was the last architectural monster of the British Raj. Conceived and executed in much the same way as Canberra (and at about the same time) it has the same concrete ghost-town image of Australia's capital and, incredibly enough for India, about the same amount of character. Huge boulevards are lined with grassy parks (with lush green meadows and virtually no cows) while towering pompous buildings stand at either end of the main Rajpath Road, dominating the skyline and making New Delhi look for all the world like a European city.

I couldn't believe it: New Delhi is easily the least Indian sight I'd seen, and although it's fascinating and grandiose, it's totally alien to the concepts of comfort,

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habitation and the joy of life.

Old Delhi, however, is typically Indian, and after six months of seeing pandemonium personified it held no surprises for me. Luckily it did hold some good examples of Mughal architecture: after basing their capital first at Fatehpur Sikri and then Agra, the Mughals decided, in one last attempt at creating the perfect city, to bugger off to Delhi, and Shah Jahan started building the Red Fort and Jama Masjid soon after completing the Taj Mahal. Unfortunately his son, Aurangzeb, stole the throne and screwed the empire into the ground, so these huge monuments to the most powerful pre-British empire stand as rather lonely reminders of the proud grandeur that comes before a fall: it's ironic that both Old Delhi and New Delhi should be full of architectural homage to arrogant failure.

The Red Fort is still impressive, but with its swarms of visitors and despicably run-down buildings it's not a patch on Fatehpur Sikri or (surprisingly) Agra Fort. The Jama Masjid (the Friday Mosque) is another story and still manages to impress: it's the biggest mosque in India and feels like it, but I found the atmosphere somewhat shattered by western tour groups. Bare legs in mosques are not on, so the visitors are forced to wear *lungis* to cover themselves, but with their money pouches and cameras belts it gave the impression of sexually excited

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men wandering around in bath towels; and in a display of bacterial paranoia that even the Americans couldn't beat, one French team entered the foray wearing blue elasticated plastic hospital shoe covers, eliciting stares and belly laughs from all round. The mosque was pleasant, but the tourists were simply beyond belief.

As with Dharamsala, I did almost nothing in Delhi. I saw the sights, I got Delhi belly for a couple of days, and I prepared to fly out. I was surprised at how much I wanted to leave: after a year of knowing when I was flying home, I was geared up for the move, and couldn't wait. It wasn't a reflection on India, more a reflection on me: I wanted to go home, rather than wanting to leave India.

So I did.

THE END

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