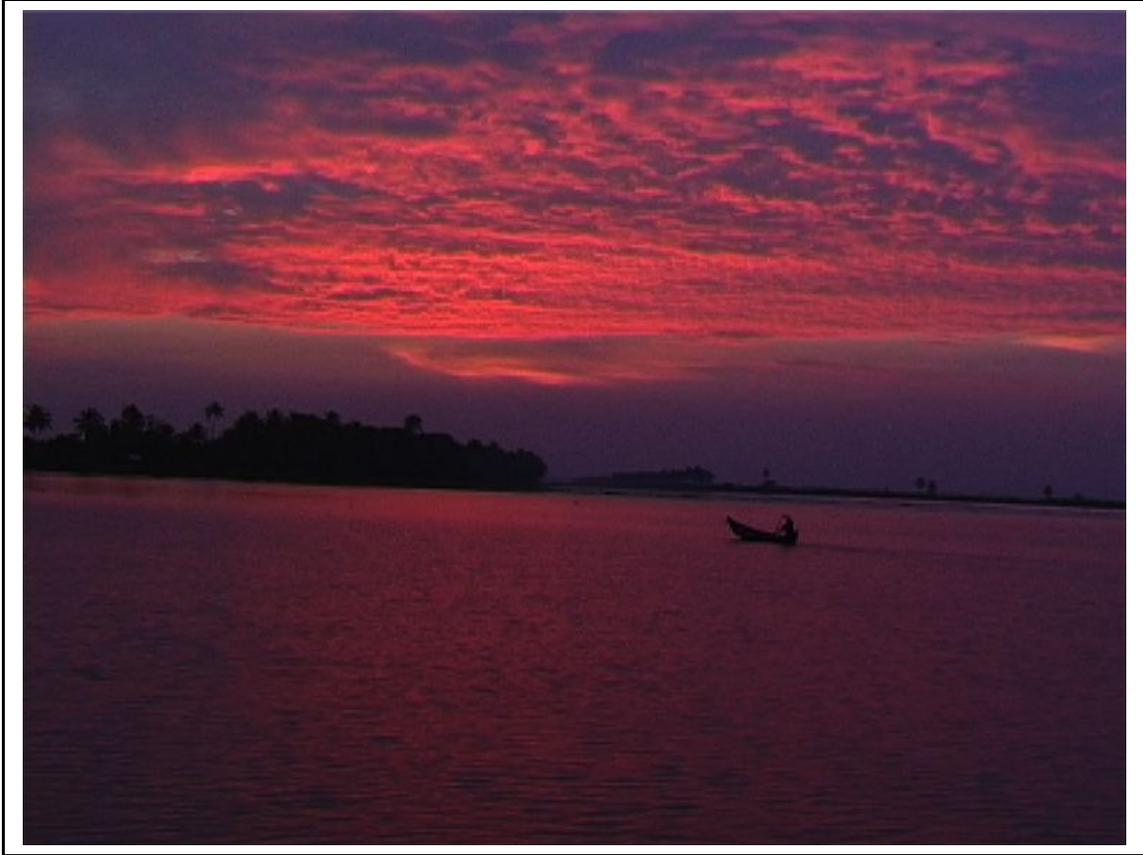


Journey Around the World

October 2000 – April 2001



INDIA

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1. Mumbai - Matheran



Mumbai (Oldies will remember it as Bombay) is owned by HSBC. Anyone who has travelled on the moving pavements at Heathrow will be aware from the insistent wall decor that this financial Goliath claims ownership of most of the well-known cities of the world, as well as stewardship of most cherishable human aspirations, such as success, hope, joy, fun, etc. (Modesty was not listed and may be some other global institution's turf.) Alighting in Mumbai it became apparent that this assertion was not mere advertising bombast. HSBC appears on hoardings everywhere, and the unsophisticated visitor could be forgiven for thinking that the city had been renamed yet again. The bank's publicity wallahs have been diligent and resourceful. Even a tiny plot of garden shimmering through a haze of industrial pollution beneath a thundering flyover has been almost entirely obscured by a huge sign announcing that it is maintained through the good offices of HSBC.

Younger generations of Britons are probably unaware what these letters stand for, as it now seems to be a deliberate policy of the bank to distance itself from its imperial origins. Yet here in the gateway to Asia, where the hobnails of imperialism left permanent wounds in the national psyche, this heritage is flaunted: the HSBC head office in Mumbai is proudly inscribed "Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank". Perhaps where it was experienced, the brand values of imperialism now appeal to the wealthy classes as a kind of retro marketing chic.

Or is it simply that the global advertising team back at world headquarters hasn't got a media budget for chisels?

It is a great fashion in India to change the names of places once people have got to know them. As a result, Mumbai locals don't know the names of the streets as printed in the guidebooks. So in the early hours of the morning our taxi driver from the airport circled round and round our destination on the curiously named New Marine Lines under my direction, and when he eventually discovered the hotel, approached from the south, rather than the north, where the airport lies, with the result that for the next couple of days we set out in the wrong direction, re-orienting ourselves and retracing our steps only if by chance we reached the sea. (New Marine Lines, according to the street signs, is actually known as Sir Vitaldas Thackersey Road or words to that effect.)

The essential appeal of India remains its colourful street life, particularly the beautiful, dignified women you see everywhere. You will see slim and elegant women in Mayfair and Milan, too. But rarely with such graceful poise and erect carriage amidst a swirl of vivid fabrics. And never so usefully engaged, with a hundredweight sack of grain or the contents of their kitchen cupboards on their heads. When have you ever spied a woman digging up the roads, say, for Haringey District Council, wearing a turquoise and fuschia gown decorated with rows of glittering mirrors in ornate silver frames, while carrying an infant on her hip?

The most welcome change in India since the '70s is that one can now get bottled water everywhere and one now possesses a credit card. For those still on the hippie trail, it now costs an outrageous £1.50 (including breakfast) to doss in the Salvation Army Red Shield Guest House overnight. Twenty-five years ago you could have hired the whole dormitory for a week for that kind of money. Yet it is still there, gently mouldering in its extremely favoured location on the funky concourse of Colaba, behind the Gateway to India. The latter is a disappointing sight if you've already seen Marble Arch. It was a disappointment all round, conceived in a patriotic flush following the visit of King George V in 1911, yet not built until 1924, just 23 years before we were chucked out, marching through it the wrong way.

On Friday evening all the wheeled transport in Mumbai heads for the northern suburbs, creeping nose-to-tail along the seafront for a couple of hours in a scene remarkably reminiscent of the Marylebone flyover at the same hour. The government information office seizes this opportunity to beam electronic messages cautioning against speeding to this captive and virtually stationary audience as well as homely lifestyle advice such as "Don't Use Plastic Bags". In the lofty manner of nanny state organisations the world over, no useful alternative is suggested, and few things in India are more multifunctional than the plastic bag. So everyone carries one or two all the time, the streets of Mumbai are awash with those that have split, and miles and miles of railway track leading from the city are lined with a sort of graveyard of plastic bags filled with a dubious but unidentifiable substance.

The suburban commuter trains trundling along these tracks would chill the heart of the most hardened Connex South Central dissident customer. Imagine the same packed standing crush, but with all the carriage doors open, so that latecomers cling to fittings on the exterior and to each other, so that if someone sneezed within, a few would be popped out onto the track.



Back in Blighty one has managed to avoid witnessing the latest TV quiz craze, "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" The Indian version, "Crorepati", is regrettably unmissable. The newspapers are full of it seven days a week, and when it is broadcast all India assembles before the television. We were dining in one of the smartest restaurants in Mumbai that night. Suddenly a large television set blinked into action and all service stopped while an ageing action film hero, Amitab Bachan, put a young contestant through a ritual torture. An instance of an Oldie finding the right retirement niche in the nick of time, as he looked too sleek and well-fed to carry on credibly in the swash-buckling trade.

The Victoria Railway Terminus in Mumbai (it, too, has another name which I resolved not to burden my memory cells

with) triumphantly elaborates the excesses of London's Victoria Station in every way, from the extravagance of its wedding-cake architecture to the scale of its cavernous interior and the mass of the human swarm which throngs it. Imagine the welcome London's portal offers to a bewildered tourist unequipped with a word of English. Mumbai's breathtaking edifice is more ambiguous, more indifferent, more Kafka-esque in its procedures - even though many of the signs are in one's own language. We were looking for rail tickets to Matheran, a hill station about 100 kilometres from Mumbai, and after three visits over two days we got them.

Once you locate it, the queue at the special window which issues the quota tickets for foreigners is short. There are two reasons for this: there is only a handful of westerners on view in the streets of Mumbai, and this particular window specialises in obscurantism. The clerk had never heard of Matheran. Although Judith observed that I pronounced it as Madiran, a region south-east of Bordeaux which produces some excellent red wines. In any event, when we returned after lunch and she enquired at the window the clerk's memory had refreshed. Certainly he could provide us with reserved tickets on the toy train which labours up the hill from Neral; moreover, we could pay in rupees if we chose, in contradiction of the regulation demanding foreign currency which was pasted in his window. However, we would have to present our passports. These,

we explained, were back at our hotel. Not to worry, there were two further options. I had the necessary qualifications to present myself at the special window for the blind, the disabled, Oldies and freedom fighters. I took my place in this distinguished company, though it looked no more lame and halt, nor politically committed than any other queue. Judith failed to qualify for this special treatment, however she could apply at the "Ladies Only" window. Whether either of us could then buy tickets for the other was not clear. There were about 20 souls in each queue. The first consultation at the teller's grille consumed 18 minutes, so we made a round trip by taxi to fetch the passports and obtained our Neral to Maderan reservations at the foreigner's window. As for getting from Mumbai to Neral, this was beyond the gift of our now familiar chum, who could only gesture in the general direction of other booking offices and other queues. At one of these we extracted the information that tickets on this line could be bought only within 24 hours of departure. And so it was on the day of the journey and our third visit to the Victoria Terminus that we concluded our arrangements for this brief excursion, including seat reservations in a first class carriage obtainable from one hour before departure at a special booth on the platform.

Matheran was invented in 1850 by a British civil servant who wondered what was at the top of an 800-metre ridge which rises abruptly from the plain. The answer was nothing but trees and the animals which inhabit them. But it was pleasantly cool, so he built a house there and a hill station developed. Social-climbing Indians followed their British rulers up the hill, and in 1907 a narrow gauge rail service was initiated from Neral. It takes two hours, with frequent stops for cold drinks and snacks. In the toy train carriages this advice is posted: "For your safety keep windows open during storm as otherwise bogies may get thrown." Presumably this is a problem only during school outings.

From the top Matheran is an island in the sky which you can stroll around in a few hours. The guidebook cliché is that on a clear day you can see Mumbai. However there has probably not been a clear sky over Mumbai for a very long time. At any rate we could only glimpse the next hilltop through the mist. When the British left India, upper class Indians abandoned their large villas and the island now has a haunted, desolate air. Motor vehicles are not permitted in Matheran, so horses are the favoured means of transport. Recently it has become a popular holiday destination for the families of the emerging middle class and shops have sprung up to supply them with souvenirs, cameras for hire and many varieties of chikki, a delicious toffee and nut sweet. And so the place is a melancholy mix of a Wild West township and Bognor Regis.

We stayed at Lord's Hotel, a rambling 100-year-old bungalow structure with a new swimming pool pinned to the edge of the precipice by a fig tree. Mr Lord, a genial Oldie, was born there. In the monsoon season, from June to September, the dirt roads dissolve into rivers of mud and no one comes up here. Mr Lord decamps to a condo in southern California, whose climate he vastly prefers.

I should not like to leave you with the impression that we have found our way about independently. Wherever one goes in India, and particularly in railway stations, one is accosted by plausible, often very handsome chaps, with glittering smiles, who after the usual preliminaries ("What is your good name? What is your native place?") trot along beside you. Often it develops that they are trying to provide you with a service - guiding or "smoking" or something indecipherable. But much of the time they simply want to have a friendly chat and try out their English. It is difficult to distinguish quickly between the two approaches but it doesn't really matter because even the hucksters, when they have finally been persuaded that there is no chance of doing business with you, are nevertheless pleased to offer helpful information and advice.

Our rucksacks are heavier than they should be, because I have encumbered us with the new artefacts of information technology: a video camera, a palmtop computer and a mobile phone. While each of these is lightweight and miniature, they all come with impedimenta - extra apparatus and chargers and manuals repeating the same information in several languages. The palmtop, it is claimed, will access the Internet through the mobile phone via infrared signals, simply by placing the two side by side. I have seen this work when a message was sent from one end of a counter at Selfridge's to a computer at the other end. But the mobile phone coverage map of India is mostly white space. I have used none of these devices before and all are still stowed in their wrappings and so all facts and data in this report have been supplied by people one meets in the street. Still, it's the word on the street, and in India it's the street that matters.

2. Nasik – Aurangabad



We were in a choice perch sitting on the floor of the second class carriage, enjoying a cool breeze through the open door. Our companion was Mr Vikram Phadke, partner in Venus Chickens, a farm near Nasik which ships 60,000 kilos of poultry to Mumbai every six weeks. The fertile upland region of Maharashtra we were trundling through also exports seedless grapes to your local Tesco; only a tiny amount is grown for winemaking, including vine stock imported (pirated?) from Champagne to make Indian fizz.

Mr Phadke expressed surprise when I told him that we, too, were destined for Nasik Road. There is no reason whatsoever for anyone to go to Nasik Road except to get to Nasik, eight kilometres away on a highway choked with autorickshaws. And on the face of it there is no reason for a tourist to visit Nasik. It is a dusty provincial town about 200 km northeast of Mumbai with a population approaching a million and a traffic problem approaching bedlam. We were stopping there because it's on the way to Aurangabad and we didn't want to arrive in that tourist centre without a hotel reservation just before midnight on the eve of Diwali - the Indian equivalent of the British New Year's Holiday plus America's Thanksgiving Day. At that season all of India moves on to the railways. We were able to obtain second class tickets at Kalyan, a rail junction near Matheran, but no reservations. In the carriages people sat, stood and squatted everywhere - in the aisles, between the seats, and on bags - and the

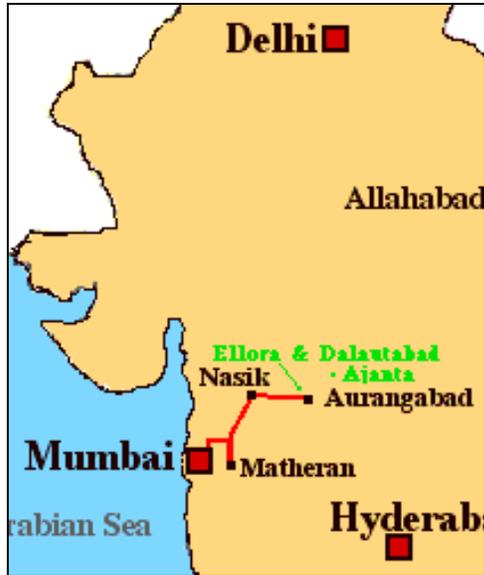
lucky minority crammed four or five to a three-person seat. Somehow a constant stream of vendors, some of them blind, filtered through this throng, offering hot tea and coffee, snacks and an extensive selection of all those journey requisites which the distracted traveller is apt to overlook in his last-minute haste: hair combs, mirrors, costume jewellery, noisemakers and replacement soles for one's sandals.

Nasik, in fact, was full of tourists, but none of them were westerners. In the two days we were there we saw no white faces, not even our own, owing to the lighting conditions in the hotel bathroom. The receptionist immediately assumed we had come to visit a large meditation centre whose golden spire Mr Phadke had enthusiastically pointed out to us some hours back down the track. She, too, could not imagine any other reason for our arrival. The tourists were pilgrims from all over India. They seek out holy rivers the way other resolute types bag Munros in Scotland. They had come to immerse themselves in the holy river Godavari, a muddy rivulet which looks like London's buried River Fleet might if it were to be brought to the surface today. This ooze is dammed, diverted and dissipated on all sides by concrete stepped ghats, bridges, logjams of rubbish, and the square stone bathing tank called the Ramkund.

People congregate here in their hundreds: graceful women slapping their laundry in the murky liquid and stretching colourful saris out on the stones to dry, pilgrims bathing and standing in the water waiting for their turn to be anointed by one of the three scowling priests who squat on the edge of the bathing tank, kids splashing and shouting in the water - holy or not - like kids everywhere, and a teeming market of stalls displaying cartloads of bananas and oranges and neat mounds of tomatoes, plump aubergines and small egg-shaped striped ones, okra, onions, peppers, mouli, curry leaf, coriander and chillies, warty things, apples, pomegranates, dried sultanas, rice, dhals, nibbles, flour, sugar, spices, powders, hair decorations, kitchenware, rat poison and sugary snacks sizzling in hot oil.

It was while we were doing a bit of desultory sightseeing that we first realised that one of the must-see sights of Nasik was ourselves. At the Kala Rama temple a well-dressed family of pilgrims seemed to be following us about. Finally, a young man approached with a camera and asked if we could take a picture. At least that's what I thought he said. I'm well used to this, because living around the corner from the famous zebra crossing which the Beatles, in a moment of creative desperation, decided to use as the cover of their Abbey Road album, hardly a day passes when I am not accosted in the road by a grinning Japanese teenager and asked to photograph a group sauntering and giggling across the road, often with one member of the party barefoot. Traffic is constantly interrupted and some day this is going to lead to awful carnage. But there was no traffic in the serenity of the Kala Rama, so I gracefully offered to take a portrait of the family on their pilgrimage. No, that was not what they were on about at all. What they wanted was a photograph of us - an exotic foreign species they had encountered on this memorable journey - to paste in their family album. And every member of the family had to be included, in various groupings in a series of snaps, so that no one felt left out.

This, we thought, was surely an eccentric, naïve family from the back of beyond. It was not until later that we realised the universal character of our celebrity. While placidly contemplating the colourful flow of life along the holy river in the late afternoon sun, swatting away the beggar children, we were



accosted by a man who made it clear that he wanted to photograph us together with his small son and daughter. The daughter quite sensibly started screaming and the small boy ran away. But Dad was determined, and eventually we were photographed holding two tearful and frightened children on our laps. A photo frenzy ensued in which a continuous stream of apparently normal middle class Indians begged us to pose for one photo after another, with every possible combination of their extended families. A loafer who was hanging about managed to insinuate himself into many of them. When we take photographs of the locals Judith ensures that we are always punctiliously politically correct and ask for permission

before snapping. It wasn't until our coterie of fans had wandered off into the gathering dusk that I began to contemplate what price we might have charged them.

A notable feature about Nasik night life was that whenever we walked out of our hotel after dark we failed to find it again. It was surrounded by a maze of bazaars which blazed into life with illuminated signs, rarely in alphabetical script. Diwali had started. Streams of people surged in cross tides, firecrackers boomed, horns blared, motorbikes and pushbikes threatened from every direction, while fumes from diesel engines and hot oil frying choked the throat. We went round and round many familiar shops and corners again and again. Our enquiries were not assisted by the fact that the name of the hotel, the Panchavati, is also the name of the district by the river, which we therefore continually re-approached from different avenues. The eventual solution, which we always resisted as long as we could, was of course to take a 20p autorickshaw ride around a couple of corners.

Otherwise, technological and administrative arrangements are improving. My first ever mobile phone conversation was on a crystal clear connection to Oxford from the lounge of our seedy hotel in the great white expanse of Maharashtra pictured as terra incognita on the Vodafone global coverage map. And we have discovered that the painless way to obtain train tickets is through a travel agent who will send an unemployed chap to stand in a queue for a service charge of 80p per head. So, for the onward journey to Aurangabad we had reserved second class seats. We found them only after forcing our way down through the aisle of a packed carriage with our backpacks balanced on our heads. It took twenty minutes to get to the centre of the carriage, by which time one was

in the proper mood to evict without a qualm two of the three Indian families which were occupying our bench and the floor beneath it. The most intimidating fellow traveller remained, an infant without undergarments who was freely passed back and forth across our laps between his exquisite bejewelled mother and his sisters wearing their holiday best, without any sign of concern for the inevitable denouement. Miraculously, though the journey lasted three hours, it never came.

The remote first Millennium cave temples at Ajanta, 120 km northeast of Aurangabad, were discovered in 1819 by a party of Englishmen hunting a tiger. We saw them as they did, a row of decorated caverns sculpted into the cliff face above a dramatic serpentine bend in the river. We also inspected each of the thirty cave temples. For some reason entrance was free on Fridays, so we did not have to pay the 8p entry charge.

But India is a land of contrasts.

In the 14th Century, in an act of insanity, Sultan Mohammed Tughlaq decided to move his capital and so marched the population of Delhi 1,100 kilometres south-west to a hill near Aurangabad, where he constructed a sprawling fort, Dalaudabad. Seventeen years later he had second thoughts and marched the survivors back to Delhi. When we arrived at Dalaudabad on Saturday we were greeted by a bombshell. In an act of insanity, the Office of the Archaeological Survey of India had decreed an increase in entrance fees, timed to coincide with our arrival. The charge for Indians was doubled, from five rupees to ten. For foreigners? Not doubled, not ten times more, but five US dollars instead of five rupees. That's almost fifty times as much. In India this is serious money. For five dollars you can hire a cheerful man and his car to drive you anywhere you want to go for half a day. And this edict, we feared, might now apply to every site in India under the control of this unhinged organisation, including all of the major attractions on everyone's must list and a great many more you won't have heard about until you're in the area and might be inclined to visit on a whim.

Now, there's no doubt that entrance fees to India's historic sites were ludicrously low, and there is a strong case, too, that comparatively wealthy foreign visitors should be asked to pay more than indigenous tourists. But an increase of fifty times is an extortionist marketing strategy. Entrance fees now become a significant element in the foreign traveller's budget, and no one will visit the minor sites at these prices. The word on the street, among the taxi and autorickshaw drivers, the stall holders and hawkers, is that this would have a serious impact on everyone who lives off the tourist trade, which is just about everyone we have met so far. Perversely, the archaeological wallahs have left the charge for using a video camera at 25 rupees - about 40p. A much fairer system would be to increase the levy on those, both Indians and members of other races, such as myself, who choose to wield these expensive toys. We paid the ransom to inspect the twisting passages of Fort Dalaudabad, where the Sultan poured boiling oil down upon intruding archaeological surveyors and their ilk, but passed at the Kailash temple at the nearby Ellora caves. The wonder of this is

that it is carved from out of the rock as a single monolith and is therefore best admired from outside. There was no charge at all to wander freely all about the thirty Bhuddist, Hindu and Jain caves sculpted from the escarpment at Ellora. Back in Aurangabad we also jibed at paying five US dollars to inspect the local curiosity, a poor man's Taj Mahal called the Bibi-ka-Maqbara made of peeling plaster instead of marble. Once again, we contemplated it from without, lying on the grass. Like so much of India, a good view freely offered.

3. Hyderabad



It is perfectly possible to get a reasonable night's kip on a second class sleeper on an Indian train. Most mainline "express" services are broad gauge, meaning the tracks are 1.67 metres apart, which permits roomier carriages, longer berths, and a smoother ride. And, as the "express" trains amble along at an average speed of 47 km per hour, there's a lot less rollicking about and it feels safer, too. Sleepers dispose themselves in tiers, six bodies to a doorless compartment, plus another two ranged fore and aft in the gangway outside. We curled up into bedsheets Judith had sewn into envelopes. Our female companions ingeniously converted their saris into coverlets while the men just fell down in their trousers or lunghis. The only problems, as ever, are caused by one's flatmates: the late talkathon in the compartment next door, the chap who switches on the overhead light and then goes away, the other chap who rises angrily to turn it off and with it the fans as well, and the chai and coffee and snack merchants chanting down the passageways at every station.

Secunderabad, where our train arrived, and Hyderabad, which is contiguous with it, are known as twin cities. Don't you believe it. Twin cities offer identical facilities. The thing about Secunderabad/Hyderabad is that whatever service you seek - the state tourist office, the notable monument, the

bazaar, the famous hotel or the recommended restaurant - it is in one of these cities and you are in the other, separated by about 12 km of noisy, fume-choked road. (After wandering about various floors of a Hyderabad office with no working lifts, the home of various state ministries, we discovered that the tourist office had migrated northwards to a compromise location between the two cities.) Moreover, the autorickshaw drivers here have developed the London taxi driver syndrome. All day long they are nipping over your toes and hailing you, until the rush hour, when they roar by in fleets, all occupied, or, when you find an empty one, refusing to go to the unfanciable destination you have chosen.

The first language of most people here in the state of Andhra Pradesh is Telegu, and English seems to be less commonly understood. Even my newly acquired Hindi vocabulary - ek, do, teen, char, panch (one to five) - is of no usefulness. Communication problems result, such as the discourse between myself and a surly young autorickshaw driver who had grudgingly agreed to transport us back to our hotel for thirty pence, and demanded eighty when we arrived. We compromised: I gave him another ten pence and he kept on shouting but didn't run after me.

Because of its burgeoning computer services industry, the city is also known as Cyberabad. Presumably this activity takes place on industrial estates in the suburbs. What we saw was a conurbation comprised of tens of thousands of small shops and stalls. The city is relatively quiet until 10 am when the shops open. Thereafter it's bedlam, and, while crossing a busy street, one may stand teetering, marooned on a central divider for six or eight minutes.

I have to point out that the new Information Technology, splendid though it is as a replacement for postcards, does not improve the quality of information transmitted. I confused one credit card receipt, where the name of the establishment had mysteriously been left blank, with another which had been mislaid. Convinced that I had been the victim of a 10,000 rupee (£155) credit card scam adroitly perpetrated by a sly desk clerk in Aurangabad, I reached for the mobile phone. I managed to bring the patient staff of First Direct financial services to a state of high alarm at three o'clock in the morning, London time. Some days of anxious self-recrimination followed until relieved by receipt of the mobile phone text message that First Direct cleverly sends me each week recording all credit card transactions. Everything was in order.

Neither does the Internet ensure the acceptability of the communications it flings willy-nilly about the globe. In Hyderabad we logged onto our first Internet cafe (the name has caught on, though no refreshments of any kind are available in these sweaty booths). The first message I received was that half the print run of my just-published book excoriating the advertising industry* had been put to the torch by midnight raiders in the arches underneath Ravenscourt Park elevated tube station. (Along with my motor car. But that's another story.) Judith tried to cheer me up by suggesting it might have been an act of sabotage commissioned by a conspiracy of vested interests in the advertising industry. Much as I would like to believe this, as a former member of its somewhat dozy Board, it seems unlikely to me that the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising

now runs to an operational intelligence unit. I put the incident down to just another twitch in the tail of the Great God Random.

Another indication that one would be unwise to defer judgement to the new Information Technology: while viewing the rushes of our filming in Hyderabad's turbulent Laad Market Judith was depressed to think that she looked like that odd person she saw on the screen. Even that remarkable gadget, the digital video recorder, cannot reproduce the beauty so apparent to the eye of the beholder. (That's enough purple. Ed.)



The technologies of the Laad Market, (and their social consequences) are of Dickensian times. Smart jewellery and fabric shops line the perimeter, while within the winding lanes the wares are made in tiny open storefronts. The thrifty shopper deals direct with the factory. We watched a silver toe ring being manufactured. Various technicians squatted on the dirt floor, one heating a gob of metal in a tiny long-handled ladle on an open bellows-stoked fire, then plunging it into water; another specialist rolled it into a sliver in a grooved board, another hammered the metal into a circle on a smoothly gradated iron cone, and another buffed the ring to a shine. Throughout the process the well-heeled lady customer sat on a stool, now and then extending a red-nailed foot for a trial fitting, then waiting patiently for the next round of reheating and rehammering.

Division of labour prevailed in the office supply sector, too. In one shop a group of men and youths assembled ruled notebooks. Some counted pages, others formed them into packs, others applied glue to covers and bound them. But the mainspring which governed the pace of production was a small boy operating a press that printed the ruled lines on sheets of paper, which he fed in by hand one at a time. It reminded me of that stage in my military career when I faced the prospect of serving my final 18 months standing at an Ozalid machine to feed it with architectural drawings at a similar pace. I escaped after a couple of days, but this lad presumably was serving a life sentence.

Unfortunately the driver of the taxi we hired to visit some sites within a day's drive had clearly never been to any of them. Hajid, or Jihad, as I to his increasing bafflement recollected his name, had to engage considerable local assistance. We were directed to the old fort at Devakonda by a group of school children. The tax-collecting demons of the Archaeological Survey of India have not come across this place yet. There was no entry fee, no kiosk, no officials and no trace that anyone had visited it in the last couple of centuries. Just a wide stone staircase in a deserted landscape. The sixty or so children greeted us and

our video camera with screams of joy and insisted on leading us onward and upward to every shrine and battlement. They drifted off gradually, leaving only a hard core of ten young scamps, including a six-year-old girl who was helped over the rough ground by the others. After an hour or so, this remnant, too, slid away down the smooth rocks, apologising that they now had to return to school, leaving us to savour in solitude the serene tranquillity of this ruined eyrie of arches and blockhouses, crumbling stairways, slumbering temples, green ponds, dark wells and distant views. It was like entering the imaginary landscape of one of those mystical computer games - *Myst* or *Riven*. It was quiet and peaceful but alive with the muted cries of birds and distant wailing from a temple unseen below on the plain. Huge butterflies fluttered past and we glimpsed the occasional emerald parakeet, and suddenly spied Om inscriptions or carvings of Hanuman and other gods on the rocks, the handiwork of a vanished race.

We drove on another forty kilometres through hamlets where tribal women laden with jangling jewels and winking mirrors sold fruit and piratical tribal men wore breech cloths and shouldered coils of rope they use to scale coconut palms. We drove over heaps of millet spread over the road by farmers to be threshed under the tyres of the traffic (an excellent argument at last for the motor car). Nagarjuna Sagar is a huge lake created by a dam, a favourite destination for day trippers. Like all such reservoirs it was bleak, although we finally managed to evoke from its depths some excellent fried fish. We were at the edge of the Rajiv Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary. However gaining entry to these game parks seems to be a bureaucratic exercise involving the hiring of guides and Land Rovers, camping equipment and provisions, and extensive correspondence with District Commissioners. Whether there is anything remarkable to see in these parks is in any case doubtful. Even the poachers are running out of wild tigers, as they were forced to kill and skin a tigress in the Nehru Zoological Park in Hyderabad just the other day.

Huzzah! The fiends of the ASI also seem to have overlooked Hyderabad's premier attraction, the sprawling fort of Golkonda, where entry for all is still only 5 rupees. Two rupees was the cost of a tour of its attendant tombs where Golkonda's many generations of despots now provide the cover of a tree-shaded park for trysting couples on a Sunday afternoon.

We wanted to travel south-west to the ruined city at Hampi in Karnataka. According to our indispensable guide "Trains at a Glance", the logical way to get there is by rail, some 400 km south to the junction of Guntakal and then 200 km west to Hospet, which is a 12 km autorickshaw journey from Hampi Bazaar. But that means waiting from midnight until 3 am in the doubtful ambience of Guntakal railway station for the onward connection in order to arrive in Hospet thoroughly fagged out at 10 am.

The alternative is to sit up bleary-eyed in an overnight bus. But experience has left us with deep concerns about the hazards of Indian roads at night, about the roadworthiness of Indian buses, and the qualifications of their drivers. The dilemma was resolved by an article in the *Deccan Herald*. It reported that 600 Hyderabad bus drivers had just been sacked for driving with fake licences. Even

when detected many had bribed their way through the selection boards. The authorities discovered that some had been driving without a licence for ten years or more, and had acquired little knowledge of the rules or recognition of the signs governing road traffic.

Judith came up with the Irish solution. We would take a train leaving in the late afternoon in the opposite direction, travelling eastwards 300 km almost to the shores of the Indian Ocean, to Guntur Junction. There, after a three hour wait, during which we could seek out dinner, we could board the Hospet-bound express at 11 p.m., early enough to get a full night's sleep. And by this stratagem we effected our safe exit from Hyderabad. Or Secunderabad.

*"The Big Lie - the Truth about Advertising", still available through www.randomthoughtslimited.co.uk. -Ed.

4. Hampi



Since arriving in India our accommodation has followed a steeply descending curve in comfort and quality and we have now arrived at the nadir, the Sri Rama Tourist Home in Hampi Bazaar. In Mumbai, the most expensive city on the subcontinent, our suite of sitting room cum bedroom in a mid-range commercial hotel (sans air-conditioning, which we abhor) cost £55 per night, but provided full service, including tea at any hour at the touch of a button, and I don't mean a Teasmade. At the hill station of Matheran, for about the same daily rate, we stayed in a bungalow with a valley view at the charming Lord's Hotel, including full board and a swimming pool. In Nasik and again in Aurangabad a double in a dreary commercial hotel cost around £20. In Hyderabad a large room with a balcony in the elderly Taj Mahal Hotel, set in its own off-street compound, cost only £7.50. But it was significant that all of these establishments included western style bathrooms.

There are no hotels in Hampi Bazaar, only guest houses. But the village actually lies within the boundaries of the ruined city of Vijayanagar and here is where the action is. We chose the Sri Rama Tourist Home because it was one of the few which offered attached bathrooms and because the autorickshaw driver

pulled up in front of it. A double room cost £2.40 per night payable by cash in advance, which is more than most western backpackers want to spend, and thus it is frequented largely by Indian visitors. The two-storey concrete-built Sri Rama belongs to a class of lodgings well beyond the influence of western sanitary ware design. One doesn't want to go into details of our attached facility in what is a family medium, but procedures require a hole set in the floor, a firm set of quadriceps, quantities of cold water drawn from taps and shower heads, and plastic buckets of various sizes, but not loo paper. It is prudent to wear one's sandals in this room.

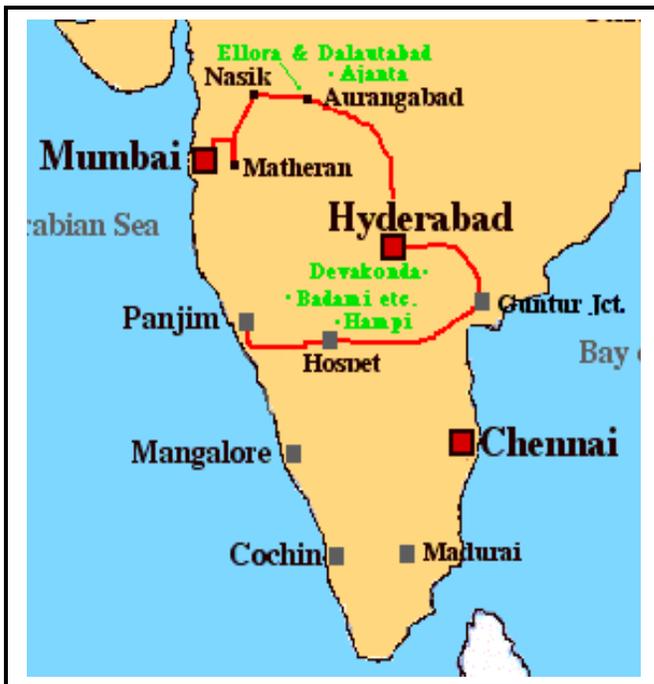
There was a pleasant restaurant in an airy shack at the back, where, if you entered at an early hour, you only had to rouse the family sleeping on the floor under a plastic sheet to obtain a cup of tea and some scrambled eggs. Afterwards the lady of the house would draw a rangoli, sifting rice flour onto the hardpacked dirt threshold through deft fingers to ensure that the day would be propitious. Each morning she produced a different intricate design.

We were favoured with the best room in the house, on the second storey with a window and a ceiling fan, and a comfortable, if dingy bed. The other rooms, crammed with families, were mere cells. We were worried about security, despite the grilles on the window and the padlock on the door. On the other hand, we were not inclined to carry valuables with us during the day. Behind the guest house reception counter was a row of mug shots of wanted villains who prey on tourists at knifepoint in the remote sections of the site, which covers some 27 square kilometres. So we divided the risk between the daypack and the backpack and felt half-anxious all of the time. We chained our locked packs to the bedstead, but we needn't have bothered. Security at the Sri Rama was superb; in the five days we stayed it was patent that none of the friendly staff had entered the room for any reason whatsoever, and so the bedsheet envelopes we carried with us came in useful again.

An uncompromising summary of the hotel regulations was written on the wall of our room in large letters in red paint. Point 3 was: "Spitting and drawing on walls strictly prohibited and those are severely charged". I don't know if our fellow guests dabbled in murals, but aggravated throat-clearing is a favourite pastime of Indian men. Each dawn was greeted by a great chorus of spitting, coughing and hawking from within the residence, augmented by soloists passing by outside. I was seized by the throat by the grandmother of all infections, and so I was soon competing with the most accomplished of our neighbours. If it were an Olympic sport I could have honked for India. However, I perceived no need to decorate the walls.

The landscape in which Hampi sits could have been imagined by J.R. Tolkien. Huge rounded stones rise in piles on low hills from the vivid green forests of banana trees. A broad brown river winds through them, churning white over the boulders that have rolled down into it. A path follows the river through rocky passages, across brown fields and smooth carpets of stone, past the collapsing monuments of a departed civilisation. Everywhere there are majestic temples, vast bathing tanks, elephant stables, palaces and the remains of

the long bazaars which approached them. The aqueducts have fallen into disuse, but canals dug centuries ago still irrigate the fields. There is a stone chariot two storeys high with wheels like great millstones that once revolved. On every hilltop there is a glimpse of a holy structure, round every bend a mystic inscription or the likeness of a fantastic god is carved into the rock. There is a stone arch which still has the hooks from which a balance was suspended each year for the monarch to sit upon. Everyone had an interest in keeping him well fed, because his weight in wealth was distributed to the populace. On the approach to this arch the shapes of human feet are carved into the rock, then the images of prostrate figures abasing themselves towards it.



Stone fingers rising in a double arc across the river bed show it was once spanned by a mighty bridge. Now the river is crossed only by coracles, black saucers woven of branches and covered with discarded agricultural chemical bags smeared with tar. A single man with an oar spins this vessel through the grip of the current with a cargo of a dozen passengers or more, and bicycles and motorbikes. Upstream an impressive concrete plaque commemorates the completion of a new bridge in 1997, adumbrating in painstaking detail not only the length of the span and the height of the towers but other minutiae, such as the clearance above flood level and

the technical specifications of the paint used on its girders. Behind this informative edifice two unfinished concrete towers stand in the river bed. Could it be that the coracle paddlers' union exerted political pressure on the highway planning department?

A peaceful civilisation peoples this landscape now, bathers and launderers splashing in the river, beggars and sellers of fruit and tea and snacks and trinkets squatting in the shade of the rocks or under a Banyan tree. Yet it is not difficult to raise your eyes and imagine the glitter from a hundred thousand spears as an army forms on the skyline, or to hear the thunder of a thousand armoured elephants trundling down the winding track to the great bridge. Hampi is on the site of the capital city of Vijayanagar, one of the largest Hindu empires in history. In the fourteenth century Muslim invaders were pillaging all of north India. The armies of Muhammed Tughlaq, the selfsame despot who evacuated the population of Delhi to Aurangabad and back (see report 2), laid waste the small fortified town on the north bank of the Tungabhadra river, where the ruined bridge led. Facing annihilation, the ancient Hindu kingdoms of south India

formed an alliance. They mustered armies of a million men and thousands of elephants. Wars, treaties and treacheries ensued under a series of bloodthirsty rulers on both sides who numbered the populations they slaughtered in lakhs. (A lakh is a hundred thousand). Yet, this confederation effectively drew the line at this muddy river, halting the Muslim invasion and preserving the Hindu kingdoms for two hundred years. The divide is still apparent in the religions, languages, culture and political structures which separate these regions today.

At its height at the beginning of the sixteenth century the capital city of Vijayanagar sprawled over 43 square kilometres. Surrounded by seven concentric circles of fortifications and sheltering a population of half a million, it was a great centre of trade in diamonds and precious items of all kinds. Today Hampi Bazaar is essentially one straight wide street which extends the best part of a kilometre. The western end is dominated by a temple gopuram (a gateway tower like an Egyptian pylon). A monolithic sculpture of the sacred bull Nandi blocks the opposite end. In 1520 a Portuguese visitor recorded a great bazaar "of very beautiful houses with balconies and arcades. The double row of tumbledown buildings made of great stones, housing simple dwellings, shops and backpackers' cafes advertising falafel and "Australian muesli" are its remains. The Portuguese agreed to supply the Hindus with superior horses, while denying them to the Muslims, and this was the origin of their influence in the area, which led to the creation of their colony of Goa.

We wandered freely through this magical kingdom for four days. For lunch we reclined on mats under mango trees at shacks overlooking the river. Dinner was taken in rooftop restaurants with a view of the temple gopuram over the low buildings. Even if these places are empty you have to enter at least an hour before you want to eat. Everything, even a thali of vegetable curries and chapatis, is freshly cooked. We enjoyed a memorable cashew curry flavoured with tamarind, a sophisticated taste like bitter sundried tomatoes, and a garlic soup which cut through my heavy cold like a chest rub.

Our visit has coincided with a three-day festival. A stage has been erected before the Nandi and several thousand plastic chairs set up in the colonnaded area leading to it. Each nightfall troops of musicians and dancers assemble in the street, some semi-naked, others in masks and colourful costumes who brandish tall plumed poles, and a coquettish bevy of heavily made-up transvestites. They create a furious din prancing about blaring on trumpets and beating on brass breastplates, yet it is an hour before the procession moves off towards the arena. And every night there follows a series of lengthy speeches by local dignitaries. Even those who can understand Kannada pay scant attention; the audience mills about constantly and each speech is followed by a scattering of desultory applause, mostly from those on stage still anticipating their turn.

When the entertainment finally began we waited in vain for the scheduled demonstration of classical dance, Bharat Natyam. If you wonder whatever happened to vaudeville, it is alive and flourishing on the Indian provincial circuit. The featured act was a cheeky chappy in baggy shorts diving through hoops of fire while balancing a flaming barbecue on his head. After that a group

of classical musicians took what promised to be permanent possession of the stage and almost everyone went home. We followed a fancifully decorated representation of Nandi surmounted by a crown of fairy lights topped by an umbrella, which was being hauled down the street towards the temple on the shoulders of eight men. It was preceded by two men with forked wooden poles who lifted the overhead cables of the street lamps so it could pass under, while another helper trailed behind wheeling a portable generator which kept the fairy lights ablaze. The whole contraption lumbered to a halt every few yards so people could approach to make ritual puja.

At two special sites we were confronted with the new outrageous discriminatory charge for foreigners, five dollars or even ten. Once again, the attraction of these great buildings is their atmospheric location and external appearance and one can appreciate that perfectly well by walking around them and peering over gaps in the walls. What is mostly on offer inside these temples are sculptures of the elephant god Ganesh with his trunk broken off and more of the innumerable manifestations of the multiple-armed Shiva, now limbless. Like every foreigner we met, we demurred at these punitive charges.

However, the forces of the Archaeological Survey of India ambushed us at three separate locations north of Hampi which we drove 100 km to visit, past fields of nodding sunflowers and heaps of corn cobs. At Badami they demanded five dollars a head to visit four small cave temples in the curving red sandstone cliffs; instead we had a pleasant stroll around its vast tank. It was brimming with a bright chemical viridian-coloured liquid resembling water in which people washed their clothing, their buffaloes and themselves. The small boys who led us to a number of unguarded, weathered temples admitted that they drew the line at drinking this fluid. At Pattadakal the gatekeeper demanded ten dollars a head to enter the grounds of the temple complex. When I said I preferred to just stand outside the gate and look, a uniformed guard demanded to see my papers. Indian policemen carrying lathi to beat infidels with are not noted for their sense of humour, so it is just as well I refrained from saying he could see them for ten dollars. Again, we walked around the perimeter. At Aihole we once more declined to pay as the singular feature of these temples, their unusual curvilinear structure, is best viewed from the road outside. We strolled through the village, thereby exciting the interest of the local schoolmaster who invited us in to entertain his students. For which we demanded no charge.

We are not alone in our grievance. The New Indian Herald reports that the ASI has incurred the wrath of the French Minister for Tourism. No warning of the 5,000 per cent increase in entry fees was given to travel firms, and in France at least, this means that agents cannot legally recover the extra cost from clients who have already booked. The French Minister predicts a sharp decrease in the number of French tourists. In a country where tourism is the third largest foreign currency earner (after textiles and IT) this is an insane policy which can only be explained in terms of the right hand not knowing what the left hand is doing, and in Indian government there are a great many hands.

(Ed. note: Now that this issue has been ventilated on the international stage the author promises to stop chewing the carpet about it.)

5. Escape to Goa.



That's enough temple-bashing. Off to the fleshpots of Goa. There comes a time when India gets on top of you. The constant grating of traffic horns in your ears, fumes in your eyes, dust in your face, stench in your nostrils, dirt in your hair and under your fingernails, goats munching and cows crapping, garbage strewn everywhere, but most oppressive of all - your fellow man. People are everywhere. Walking, riding, standing, squatting, lying, limping, eating, spitting, pissing, begging. People stream towards you and people stream past, and two more tributaries flow across those rivers at every street corner. It numbs you with sensory overload. And if everyone in town goes out for a bit of fresh air at the same time they quickly use up all the living space.

India's assault is physical as well as psychological. Travelling in a hot climate, one's diet has changed and so has one's body shape. I've lost weight, first from the face, now even the love handles are vestigial. Our intake has been vegetarian mostly, and non-alcoholic. Hampi is dry and so was the state of Andhra Pradesh, and I haven't had a beer for ten days. It's time to chill out.

Paradise is a ten-hour train ride away. I am gripped with laryngitis, a blessing in a way, because whenever a curious fellow passenger inquires about my name, nationality, how long I have been in India, whether I like it, whether I

like cricket, or whether there are palm trees in England, I simply smile, shrug, and draw the edge of my hand across my throat and they go away thinking I am mute. Judith meanwhile spends hours chatting with two delightful teenage girls who are travelling to see the seaside for the first time in their lives. They share their tiffin with us from aluminium canisters while their father scowls at his newspaper.

The panorama rattling past the carriage window subtly evolves. The rocky hills of the Deccan plateau grow lush and green, sprouting dhal (lentil) bushes, coconut and betelnut palm trees, bananas and maize. By late afternoon it seems we are entering the green hills of England, but no English woodland contains teak and bamboo, the occasional chequerboard of rice paddies and buffaloes with red-painted horns. The light fades, the train labours up into the western ghats, a mountainous landscape of high ridges linked by reckless single-track bridges flung across deep valleys of unbroken forests. Tigers and wild elephants still inhabit this country. In the dark we can just make out the silvery threads of a majestic waterfall unwinding down the opposite cliffs, and just beneath us, like toys discarded on the floor at bedtime, three goods wagons that failed to make the curve. The descent is quick. We are on the flat and picking up speed. The air is warm and scented and the colourful lights of Chinese lanterns hang in the porches of the houses nestling among the palms. We are in Goa.

The Panjim Inn is one of our favourite hotels. Half an hour after rattling into Vasco da Gama we were sitting on the veranda of this 200-year-old Portuguese colonial house in front of a cold beer and a frothy glass of fresh pineapple juice, waiting for the king prawns Balchao to arrive. Behind us a door led to our four-poster bed and a western style bathroom. The Inn belongs to Frank Fernandes, an urbane bearded chap who likes to wander about in a white shirt and shorts. The heavy dark wood antique furniture he grew up with fills the guest rooms, a spacious hall, and a gloomy dining room that appears never to be used. And he goes on collecting more of it. Since our first visit he has acquired a splendid villa across the road which he has tastefully renovated with traditional tiles and opened as the Panjim Pousada. He was ably assisted in his decorative scheme by an Oxford professor who perforce had to make repeated visits to Goa over a nine-month period while endeavouring to spring his daughter out of the Goan slammer on a drugs charge.

It took Frank Fernandes years to negotiate the purchase of this villa as there were several dozen family members with an interest in the property who were scattered about India, the Americas and Portugal who had to be brought to the table. The Fontainhas district of Panjim was built on a marsh, and as the old families die off other picturesque buildings all about us are subsiding into terminal neglect. A short stroll away is the Venite restaurant on the first floor of a rickety building fringed with tiny balconies into which a couple of diners may squeeze around a small table and take in the evening breeze and the full moon with their seafood.

There are no houses left standing in Old Goa, the original Portuguese settlement a half-hour upriver by local bus - no secular life whatever except for

the odd roadside cafe. The grand cathedrals stand in a kind of parkland, for the most part intact and as proud as in the days when they represented civilisation in a savage land. In the museum are what appears to be an unbroken series of formal portraits of the many Portuguese governors who served here over 400 years. Most stayed barely long enough to sit for their portrait. The museum was once a convent, but apart from that there is no historical hint of female presence. Did the governors' wives accompany them on the hazardous journey round the Cape of Good Hope as early as the 16th century? The heavy features of many present day Goans suggest that European women were not generally available. Who were the hostesses presiding in the elegant villas shown on the drawings of the now vanished port?

When we were here four years ago the charm of the nearest beach resorts, Calangute and Baga, had already been subsumed under the packaged holiday flood. Now we took local buses onwards to Vagator Beach. We looked first at humble but clean digs in this straggling village. Twenty years ago we would have stayed there. But it was a long walk to the beach and now we had a credit card. Right on the beach we found a complex of bungalows built only fifteen years ago, but already subsiding into genteel desuetude. Judith bargained the rate down by one-third. Our bungalow has a refrigerator and we have rum, soda water and limes.

And so we dropped out for seven days in Goa, and when Saturday rolled around again we stayed another two. Our daily routine: we rise with the sun and the cawing of the crows nesting in the palm trees. The tide is high but we are able to walk around the point to a small cove where two beach shacks shelter among the cashew trees. We have our tea, dip in the surf on the shallow beach, then return for more tea, a chilli and onion omelette and chapatis spread with jam or honey. All morning this secluded cove is virtually our own. Every other day lunch is taken in the second shack: a kingfish curry and a cold Kingfisher beer to wash it down. On alternate days we walk back down the beach and over the



opposite headland to Little Vagator, which is more developed. As well as seafood, an open-air clifftop cafe offers Goan sausages, as pungent as chorizo, and bebinka, a coconut custard cake laid down in several layers. Afternoons are for excursions: up through the brush to the old fort with its magnificent views, or further along to the fishing village of Chapora on the river. This has a lot of cheap cafes and bars and a dank and dissolute ambience favoured by weathered hippies with grey pigtails and young acolytes intent on emulating their life plan.

On Wednesday everyone finds their way to the colourful Anjuna market down the coast. By patient negotiation here we

have both replenished our wardrobes with a new shirt and trousers for an outlay of less than £5 apiece. There seem to be more sunburnt palefaces here than previously, an impression confirmed after one of the motorised canoes which commutes to the market dropped us on the delightful broad beach which stretches four kilometres from Baga to Calangute. Four years ago we lazed here in isolation under a tamarisk tree. Now the sun-loungers extend in an unbroken line between the resorts. There is only one rank, so it is not yet like Kos, where there is no beach to be seen between the shacks and the water. But hurry! The Skylark beach shack is already offering each Thursday a lunch of roast beef with Oxo gravy. We repaired instead to the excellent Souza Lobo, a beach restaurant with a broad concrete veranda which catches the breeze and provides tasty specialities such as oysters Xiacuti, a delicious spicy stew.

In the late afternoon our local beach is invaded by Indian day-trippers, whose seaside behaviour is reminiscent of Britain in the 1940s. A few lads do strip down to their regulation underpants and immerse, if not exactly swim, in the sea, and play ball on the beach. A few girls go casual smart, perhaps topping a flowing shalwar kameez costume with a baseball cap, and stand on the rocks shrieking when the gentle waves break. Most families buy their straw hats and picnic on the dunes, leaving them festooned with litter when they clamber back into their charabancs. It would be interesting to return in ten years time to note the further evolution of seaside culture. (Ed. note: With your zimmerframe?)

At night we're too old for the backpacker cafe culture of cheap beer, ear-splitting pop music, action videos and international fast food. For dinner we alternate between two restaurants. The open-air Bluebird has an imaginative menu compiled by a Frenchman and offered the first drop of wine since the Lufthansa flight weeks ago, a sour Riesling. It is worth the half-hour walk each way down the dark lanes to the chirping of crickets and frogs, barking dogs, and the occasional roar as a motorbike passes. Our £16 state-of-western-art Maglite torch has expired for no accountable reason, so we bought an Indian torch. It cost 82p, including two batteries, and works fine.

Every other night finds us just at the end of our stretch of beach at the Sri Mahalaxami, another uncompromising concrete building set right on the seaside. Here we are served by Anthony Fernandes (no relation to Frank, except perhaps to a common Portuguese ancestor). He is a lugubrious Harvey Keitel lookalike, except for the charming smile which periodically crosses his face. He is a film buff with a taste for biblical epics starring Charlton Heston. This funky establishment always has several waiters lounging about but we are always the only diners. We listen to the crashing waves for a lengthy interval until Anthony returns with a tempting platter of seafood. Two days before leaving we ordered a lobster to be caught for our final meal; it was grilled simply with lemon and garlic and the usual veg fried rice was garnished with prawns. As Anthony explained, it had no claws, unlike "the Irish lobster" which was the other kind he was aware of.

Does one feel guilty living like this in a place where a worn but still smiling old woman exists by trudging the beaches with a load of pineapples on

her head hoping to sell one for a few pence? It depends on your philosophy. One viewpoint was pithily summarised for me by another beach hawker. Judith and I had developed the habit of repelling these nuisances by saying "Maybe tomorrow" instead of "No, thank you", because it seemed more effective to send them away with a smidgen of hope. But there came the day that the peddler of trinkets who squatted down beside me replied without rancour, "Maybe tomorrow. Maybe next year. Maybe next life. Maybe I come back as a tourist and you come back as a seller of souvenirs".

6. The Malabar Coast



Step into the pages of a Joseph Conrad novel. Dark-skinned clerks wearing white short-sleeved shirts sit at deal tables in ramshackle open-fronted and balconied warehouses. On the table is a group of small bowls. These contain colourful aromatic heaps of cardamom, coriander, cumin, fenugreek, ginger, cloves, turmeric and pepper. Or various types of rice. Or several varieties of dhal. Behind are stacks of hundredweight sacks filled with these grains and spices. Their fragrances drift over the trading quarter, mingling with more pungent aromas from the merchants of perfumes and scented oils, and from the stale garbage and the fresh animal droppings in the dusty, potholed street. It is filled with noise and traffic. Half-naked Indian coolies wrestles sacks on and off handcarts. Blizzards of crows flock around them. A dead goat lies at a crossroads. This is Bazar street, in Jewtown, Mattanchery, the old trading quarter of Cochin, in the year 2000.

In the 14th century a great storm broke through a sand barrier separating the backwater lagoon from the sea, creating a deepwater port behind the peninsula of Fort Cochin. It soon became the major trading centre of south-west India. The Jews, it is said, came here two millennia ago following the destruction of Jerusalem. There is a synagogue dating back to the 16th century and Jewish names remain on the fascias above the shops trading in coir and ropes and gunny sacks, new and used. A kilometre away, in Fort Cochin, is India's oldest

European church, St. Anthony's, first erected in 1503 by Portuguese friars. Inside, ropes lead from large suspended fans and out through the walls. These were pulled by heathens to cool the faithful during services.

We stayed at the delightful Fort Heritage Hotel, a Dutch Colonial house with verandas, airy corridors and bedrooms with 15-foot ceilings, constructed in 1668. After the Dutch had kicked out the Portuguese, and before they were kicked out by the British who were . . . well, you know the story. Chinese fishing nets, contraptions of 13th century technology made of palm trees and coir ropes weighted with boulders, lining the shore where fresh water meets salt dip large nets into the flood tide. They provided us with a fresh fast-food lunch. The nets are emptied into buckets that are carried to a row of fishmonger stalls where you buy your fish and then take it to a shack across the road where they will cook it for you.

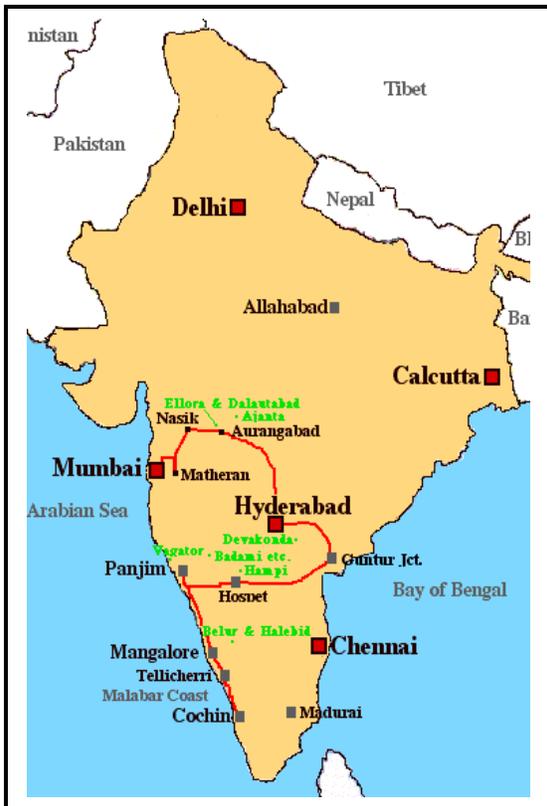
Cochin was the rewarding destination after a meander down the Malabar Coast. Indian transport is cheap, but one pays a high price in patience and, sometimes, discomfort. We detoured 200 kilometres up into the western ghats bordering the coast, using three vehicles, for a total outlay of around £1.50 each.

But first find your bus station. In most Indian towns the one you want is located on the outskirts. So our least cost-efficient transport that day was the autorickshaw which carried us the three kilometres to the bus depot for 30p. An Indian bus station is usually a concrete block bristling with stalls and set in a dusty square milling with people and circled by a constant eddy of decrepit buses with blaring horns. You may happen upon a notice board with a schedule painted on it, and if you're lucky it will be in English. However, that information is offered in an academic, rather than practical, spirit. For reliable advice one must find an official. He is probably wearing something resembling a brown streetsweeper's uniform and sitting in a tiny office.

Next, identify your bus. Rarely will its destination be displayed in English on the front. So it may be useful to have the uniformed chappie write it down for you in the local script. (If it's Tuesday, it must be Kannada). But on the assumption that the bus driver and the conductor always know where they are going, the surest policy is to go up to every bus and ask. When you find the right one, get on it fast. Because they almost always fill up. When a bus pulls in at a station, while waiting for its passengers to decant, people toss bags and handkerchiefs through its windows in hope of reserving a seat ahead of others who are simultaneously impeding the disembarkation by pushing forward at the door.

But India is full of surprises. The state bus station at Mangalore ran to a computerised ticketing service and for £1.20 each we reserved places on a "Super Deluxe" coach (padded reclining seats and tinted windows that opened, but no rooms for backpacks except where your feet should go). It toiled 160km along a wide estuary river past rice paddies, fields of pineapples and areca palm plantations (producing betel nut for pan - India's answer to chewing gum), then mounted through sun-dappled deciduous woodland and bamboo groves. Coffee

bushes grew in abundance in the shade of the forests and ripe beans were spread out on sheets in the glades. Vines laden with shiny green peppercorns twined up every tree. The hundreds of neat rectangles resembling chamois cloths, strung out on clotheslines, were latex, drawn from the grooved bark of the rubber trees. Stacked in front of shacks along the roadside were strange shapes constructed of glistening deep red branches. Twisted legs supported one or more disks no larger than teacup saucers sawn from the branches. These were pieces of rustic occasional furniture fashioned from coffee bushes. Their only practical use seemed to be as telephone tables. Given the rise of the mobile phone in India, this exotic cottage industry seems doomed.



After five hours we emerged onto the pastoral landscape of the highland plateau at Hassan. Five minutes later we were bouncing off unpadded seats on a local bus along 40 kilometres of rough road to the little town of Belur, for another 20p per head. Why had we come to this isolated ordinary village? For a spot more temple-bashing, of course. The finely-worked carvings on the local temple depict homely scenes which are far more intriguing than the usual panoply of epics and gods, for example a lady stepping from her bath and recoiling from a scorpion which has dropped from her gown. I achieved a personal apotheosis when a gaggle of thirty giggling pubescent schoolgirls insisted I should be photographed in their midst. At nearby Halebid the temple lay in landscaped grounds by a lake. The delicately wrought sculptures included an imaginative solution to an

artistic problem: to show the path of an arrow through a forest, the stonemason artist had cut grooves in the trees in the track of its flight. And because these were active temples, all we had to pay was one rupee to the man who minded our sandals.

At dusk the colony of giant fruit bats and prehistoric-looking snakebirds that inhabited a large flame tree suddenly exploded squawking in a black mushrooming cloud. A troop of 25 identical Enfield motorbikes roared into our hotel compound. Once they removed their helmets, the bikers proved to be middle-aged Brits on an organised tour. I thought of them on our bus ride back to Mangalore as I counted five lorries which had crashed, respectively, into a ditch, a tree, a bridge and each other. Goods were still being unloaded, so all were fresh casualties of the previous night.

We were to receive further instruction in the operational idiosyncrasies of that grand institution, the Indian Railway. We had achieved Mangalore by travelling the 300 kilometres from Margao, for 80p each, on a "passenger" service. These trains make frequent stops and on average manage only 27.2 km per hour. Our journey had taken nine hours. Now, after our detour into the western ghats, we were heading further south from Mangalore. Our choice was to take a train leaving at 4:30 p.m. to arrive at Ernakulum (the station for Cochin) at 3:30 am. Or to arrive in the early afternoon by departing at 3:30 am. So we decided to do both: we took the afternoon train, the romantically but misleadingly named Malabar Express, as far as Tellicherry, where we would arrive by 9 p.m., resuming our journey on the Murapuram Express at 6:53 the next morning.

Catch 22. According to our railway guide you cannot board an "Express" train without a reservation. Where could we get a reservation? From the Ticket Examiner, replied the clerk. And where is he? He is the conductor who will check your tickets on the train.

And a nasty piece of work he turned out to be. However, first we met a flawed but congenial soul who spends more time commuting than working. Or doing anything else. He commutes between Tellicherry and Mangalore six days a week. That's five hours each way if the train is on time, and tonight it was an hour late. Five hours after he crossed his familial threshold tonight he would be stepping onto the train again. He suddenly decamped from our compartment at the stop before Tellicherry and a few minutes later we found out why. The Ticket Examiner, for it was he, demanded a surcharge amounting to twice the cost of our tickets because we were in a sleeper carriage rather than the day coach. We refused, on the various grounds that we had no intention of sleeping, we were getting off at the very next station - where, in fact, if the train had been on time we would already be - our tickets had already been inspected without comment, and in any event we had been instructed to board this carriage. (This last point was true only in a Clintonesque sense. Indian trains are very long, up to half a kilometre, and so when we saw a carriage labelled 1 we boarded it, on the admittedly hopeful reasoning that it might be one of the first three behind the engine). The Ticket Examiner stolidly wrote out his surcharge slip. We picked up our packs and went to stand between the swaying carriages. The Ticket Examiner wheedled: "Why don't you pay? It's not very much money". I suggested he exercise his ultimate sanction and put us off the train at the next stop. We would arrive in Tellicherry any minute. Except we didn't. The train shuddered to one of its unaccountable halts and there we stayed for most of another hour, the Ticket Examiner and I avoiding each other's eyes every time he shouldered past.

At 6:30 am the next day we were back on the Tellicherry railway platform, but the Murapuram Express was delayed. When another unheralded Ernakulum-bound train mysteriously appeared at the platform we got on it. We passed through a littoral landscape of green banana plantations and still greener jungle. Fishermen poled long pirogues down estuaries fringed with white beaches and coconut palms, farmers tilled the coppery earth with wooden ploughs drawn by oxen, women in Day-Glo saris bent double in the rice paddies,

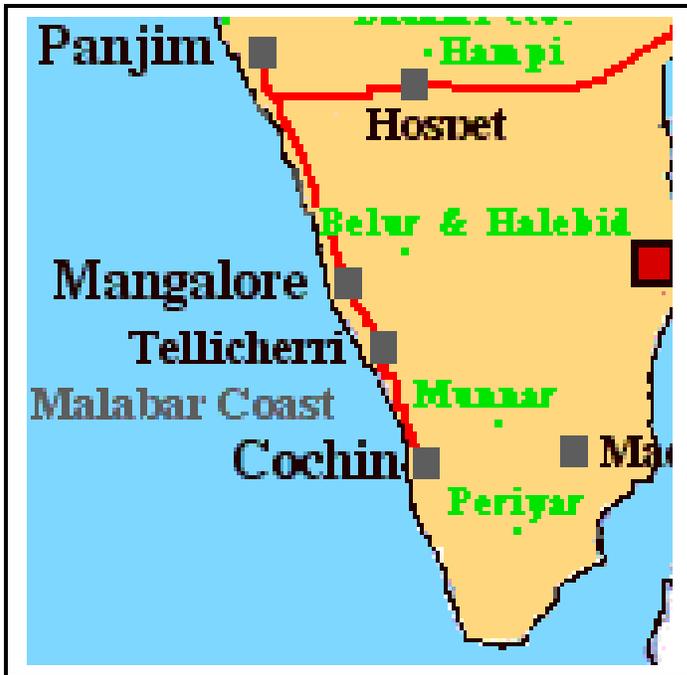
dusty orange tracks wended towards tiny villages with tiled roofs of the same colour.

Then along came the Ticket Examiner. A jolly fellow this time. He was accompanied by a man wearing a badge identifying him as the Chief Travelling Ticket Inspector. There was, you will not be surprised to hear, a problem with our tickets. Several problems, in fact. In the first place our ticket was made out for the wrong train; this one, the Ladshakweep Express, though it travelled no faster, belonged to a superior classification. Secondly, we were once again sitting in second-class sleeper accommodation, instead of an ordinary carriage. Finally, our ticket destination stated Ernakulum Town. This train did not stop there, but at Ernakulum Junction, although there was no difference in the fare. All of this was patiently explained by the bemused Ticket Examiner while his superior wore an authoritarian expression. We meekly replied that it was Ernakulum Junction we wanted to go to in any case, and that we would be happy to pay any extra charges. But this pair was not aggrieved, simply puzzled; their focus was not to extract a penalty but to satisfactorily resolve these multiple discrepancies within the meaning of the railway regulations. They sat down and conferred for five minutes. Then the Chief Travelling Ticket Inspector told us exactly what the Ticket Examiner had already explained, in rather poorer English. We nodded. They then conferred for another five minutes, with much thumbing through of schedules and unrolling of fare charts, while we tried to keep our faces straight. Finally, they charged us only for the sleeper supplement and toddled off happily, another administrative impasse successfully negotiated by the more than one million staff of the world's largest employer.

7. The Cardamom Hills



Cardamom seeds, we were told, grow close to the ground on the plants. We spent a day looking for them in the Cardamom Hills of eastern Kerala and didn't see any. We found small berries on hedge plants along the trail, but they didn't look, smell or taste right. Large clumps of shrubs with spear-shaped leaves as tall as a man populated the forested slopes beneath the trees, but these clearly could not be cardamom, said Judith, who has a doctorate in zoology - which is next door to botany - because they were monocotyledons. As you may imagine, that shut me up.



We saw plenty of tea. The bushes grow on the steepest slopes in open sunlight. Vast plantations, such as the one which we explored belonging to the Tata industrial conglomerate group, spill over entire mountainsides. Gnarled roots dig deep into the soil, preventing erosion, and the rounded shapes of the waist-high green mounds, with ordered rows and trails twisting through them, create an eerie Alice-in-Wonderland landscape. We wandered for hours past lovely hill views and the thunder of hidden waterfalls, accompanied by the sweet chirrup of a small

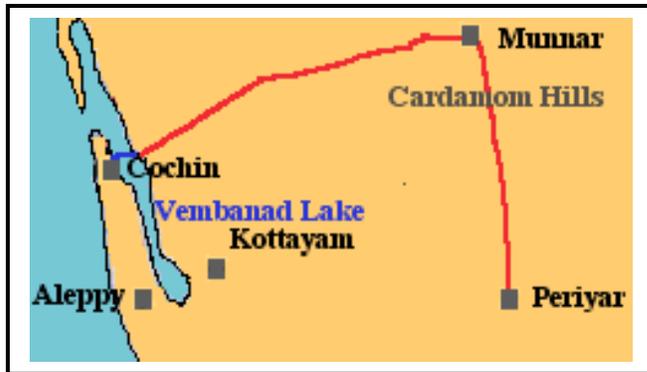
fluttering crested bird, the red-whiskered bulbul. Every three weeks the young green leaves at the top of the bushes are clipped by female workers. They use a pair of shears with a small metal box attached which they regularly empty into a sack. In the course of an eight-hour day they will pick 14 kilograms of tiny fresh leaves, earning 60 rupees (92p). There is a bonus payment of 1.60 rupees for every extra kilogram. The women live with their families on the plantations in company villages complete with small shops, schools and road transport. The whole operation is self-contained, from nurseries for new tea bushes (their productive life is from 50 to 100 years), to the processing plants where the leaves are dried for two days, to the "packeting" factory. While we waited for a return bus we completed the process by drinking a cup of hot chai at a stall. This would have been brewed from tea dust swept from the factory floor; the good stuff is sent to Brook Bond in England.

We had journeyed once more by bus up into the highlands along forested ridges with a river glinting below. Cocoa trees now augmented the horticultural bounty. It was not always possible to tell the churches from the mosques and temples until a cross was spotted, or one noticed that a garland was hung round the neck of a Madonna rather than a Ganesh, Shiva or Nandi.

We had tried to get a room in the High Range Club in Munnar, a relic of the Edwardian Raj with hunting trophies on the walls, but it had been block-booked by the Tata organisation. Panicked that rooms might be in short supply, on the advice of a guide book we booked sight unseen into the Isaac Residency for two nights. It had the charm of an unfinished prison. A concrete block under renovation, it had no banisters on the stairwell, no flooring on the substrate in the corridors, and we drew a pokey room with an occluded view of the mountains. In the windowless basement there was a cheerless, undecorated restaurant like a second-class railway waiting room, and a dank, dark bar

resembling an unlit public convenience that was full of dismal Indian males. We felt a stab of sympathy for the honeymoon couples who had booked into this building site, and took all of our meals in the equally priced but much more salubrious East End Hotel nearby. Indian couples, we noticed, sit next to each other at table, not face to face. Even honeymooners.

While it is a hub for the tea and honeymoon industries Munnar is not much more than a scruffy bazaar twisted in a confusing manner around two mountain streams. At 2000 meters there was a chill in the evening air and the locals wrapped themselves in layers of shawls and put woolly hats or towels on their heads, or even balaclavas. Only foreign visitors stroll along the hillside trails; the Indian tourists take a taxi or chartered bus to a viewpoint, have a snack and pile into the gift shop. Like most honeymoon destinations there's not a lot on offer once you get out of bed.



As the bus schedule was inconvenient we hired a jeep to drive us 100 kilometres to the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary. This proved a good investment. Not only could we stop as we liked to drink in the misty morning mountain views, but our vehicle came equipped with a guide who was knowledgeable about plants, pointing out to Judith,

for example, the cardamom seeds growing at the very bottom of the large clumps of monocotyledon shrubs with spear-shaped leaves that populated the forest floor.

We splashed out on the Lake Palace Hotel (£100 for a double room, but including all meals and twice-daily boat excursions) because it was situated on the lake in the heart of the game reserve. It was built in 1931 as a summer lodge by the king of Travancore and has about eight bedrooms and a small dining room. Our bedroom had a wrap-round veranda with a view over an arm of the lake and was furnished with dark antique furniture, including a four-poster bed.

Each day at dawn and again in the hour before dusk we boarded a small motorboat to cruise the artificial lake in search of game. Between-times we sat on the lawn under the Banyan tree and trained our binoculars on a live stage on the opposite shore. The performance extended throughout the day as small herds of wild boar, samba deer and Indian bison grazed, or came down to the lake to drink amongst the woolly-necked storks. Lunch and tea were served on the veranda. On the first day, when I asked the waiter what was for lunch he replied "Chicken, fish, mutton and vegetable curry". Before I could make my choice he was gone, and when he returned he came back with the lot.

There was a cyclone on the other side of the subcontinent in the southern Bay of Bengal and on the second day we caught the edge of it. It was the first

serious rainfall since our arrival. But what a perfect place to enjoy a drizzly day. The rain didn't trouble the animals, and on our boat trips we bagged elephants and otters as well as the usual ungulates. There was a moment of high drama just before sunset when a pack of a dozen wild dogs attacked a group of boars. Three large boars, cut off from the rest at the waterside, formed a defensive knot, standing rump to rump with their tusks facing the enemy, like a circle of Conestoga wagons besieged by Navajos. The dogs made snarling forays in groups of two or three. Their battle strategy is to drive a boar into the shallows where they can overpower it, but we were denied the climax. Elephants were spied on the opposite shore and boat chugged away. Half an hour later, on the return voyage, the dénouement was played out. The boars were gone, except for two large carcasses which lay in the shallows on the darkling shore. The Alpha dog was feasting on them, pulling out the intestines with slavering chops while the rest of the pack skulked in the shadows, waiting their turn. The next morning a solitary crow picked at the tattered remains.

A more fortunate boar found its way into our garden across the ha-ha, a dry moat designed to keep out the elephants, but was chased away by Judith. Our other companions included a retired orthopaedic surgeon and his wife from San Francisco, who had been globe-trotting in high style for 18 months (next stop, believe it or not, Honduras). And a pair of intrepid well-bred gels from East Sussex who, with the teeth-gnashing luck of inexperienced youth, not only had found a room at the High Range Club in Munnar on the night we were told it was fully booked - simply by turning up on the doorstep - but also had the poor taste to casually inquire whether, on the boat journey to the Lake Palace, we had noticed that panther.

8. The Backwaters of Kerala



Two names with telephone numbers were written on my note but neither of them were responding. So when the waiter brought round his bottomless buckets of rice and vegetable curry and sauce again, I had another plateful. This family restaurant was a serendipitous choice. Kottayam was in the grip of a noontime rush hour when we got off the bus. So we had lugged our backpacks through the traffic to the first place we saw. It offered a delicious thali served by solicitous staff for 30p.

I punched in a number again on the mobile phone. This time a man answered. I couldn't understand a word he said, though he seemed to be trying to speak English. I managed to spell out the name of the restaurant to him, but for all I knew had connected with someone in Calcutta - or Timbuktu. So I gave the phone to the waiter. He gabbled a minute or so, then, largely through sign language, gave me to understand that the man would call back in five minutes. Wrong. Five minutes later he walked in the door and within another five we were boarding our houseboat, a kettuvallam moored in a dirty canal. About 50 feet long, 12 feet in the beam, and humped like an Anderson shelter (so appropriate), it had large bamboo shutters which opened like wings to let in the breeze, and was topped by a pagoda-shaped ridge which would vent in air but keep out the rain. It was steered from the bow and powered by a massive outboard engine attached to a platform on the side. Just aft of the steering wheel

in the bow was a lounge with rattan furniture. Behind that two large bedrooms, each with a western-style bathroom suite, and a galley kitchen opened off a side gangway. We were the only passengers, and we had a crew of three: helmsman, cook and our guide and general factotum, Uni. We set off right away. We aimed to anchor in Vembanad Lake that evening and Uni explained that we had to get through the canal network before 4:30 p.m., when the fishermen were permitted to stretch their nets across it. However, the fishermen jumped the gun and we were forced to turn back and moor overnight in a small lake at a canal crossroads. An endless radio transmission of religious chanting thoughtfully rebroadcast over the moonlit waters by an unseen temple pursued us to sleep through the hot, humid night, and welcomed us again before sunrise.

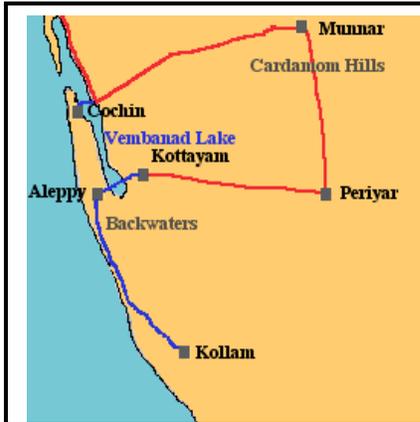
The evening meal by oil lamp was delicious, and like every one that we ate for the next three days, based on fresh coconut. Clamped to a counter in the galley was a kind of rounded hook which is used to excavate the flesh from coconuts, and whenever we heard it scraping we knew a meal was in preparation: curries for lunch and dinner, and for breakfast, cakes formed of steamed rice powder and coconut, served with scrambled eggs masala.

Great green carpets dotted with mauve blossoms spread over large sections of the canals and lake. Water hyacinth clogs the backwaters all the way to Cochin, where we had seen it drifting out to sea. A demanding part of the helmsman's job is to follow channels through the weed, and a part-time duty of the cook is to clear the propeller of the outboard motor when it is seized in a tangle.

The Kerala backwaters, a skein of lagoons and canals extending behind the barrier to the Arabian Sea for 180 kilometres, from above Cochin down to Kollam, is a land of plenty. Almost everything that grows is eaten, and often put to sundry other uses as well. The people are well-nourished, friendly and busy. They live in small concrete houses or shacks with straw roofs, perched on the narrow paths dividing the canals from the vivid green expanse of rice paddies stretching behind them. Three times a year, as each new crop is planted, water is pumped from the canals to flood the paddies. The harvested rice is boiled lightly, spread out to dry in the sun, then milled to separate grain from husk. The straw is used for fodder and stored in ricks built over a frame on an elevated platform. The people bathe and wash on steps leading down into the shaded canals, and wherever the footpath widens into a patch of dirt kids who know how to swim play improvised cricket with a ball that floats.

Fishing nets are everywhere, including a string of the Chinese contraptions seen in Cochin installed in a lagoon behind a saltwater inlet. These are used only in the monsoon season and the only marine life we saw here were jellyfish intruding from the sea. Fishermen's canoes skim across the mirrors of broad estuaries. Behind them are glimpses of surf-rimmed beaches. At a fisherman's shack Uni bought six live specimens the size of small trout for our dinner and received change from a 100 rupee (£1.60) note.

Men cling to boats tethered to bamboo poles, gulping air before diving beneath the surface to sift the mud for bivalves. After the flesh is eaten the shells are ground up as an ingredient for fertiliser and white paint. Labourers stand by their canoes in the shallow lakes, loading them with clay from the bottom for constructing dikes and buildings. Other men float serenely down the canals herding an obedient flock of ducks.



The pirogues are fashioned from hardwood planks sawn from the anjili tree, perforated along the edges, then stitched together with twine and tarred. Somehow this keeps the water out. Often they have a small rag of sail, but usually the canoes are paddled from the stern like a Venetian gondola. One canoe we inspected, housed in a shed, was over 100 feet long. This was a traditional snake boat, now used only to compete in an annual race. It carries 106 men, including six who are employed solely to beat time for the seated rowers, and eight who stand on the high elevated stern, twirling long paddles high over

their shoulders before plunging them vertically into the water. The pace of the rowers is furious and the speed of the racing snakeboats, as we saw on a television clip, is phenomenal.

The hull of our boat, based on the traditional design of a rice barge or kettuvallam, is also made from anjila wood, the hoops supporting the roof come from the areca palm, lashed with coir fibre string and covered with woven palm fronds; the deck matting is also made of coir. Cashew and cocoa trees provide the major exports of the region, jackfruit trees yield huge fruits, pandanus fronds are woven into many useful products and tapioca and other edible starches are extracted from the roots of several varieties.

Palm trees are also the source of building wood and fronds for fencing, roofing and baskets - and booze. The men carrying pots along the paths and wearing a heavy knife in their belts are the toddy tappers. They cut the flower stems near the top of the tree and insert straws which lead into a large gourd. Three times each day they clamber up the tree and draw off the liquid. As the day progresses, the alcohol becomes more concentrated (and the occupation presumably more hazardous). The fermented sweetish liquor is sold in simple toddy shacks. A cloudy, grey potion, it is a taste unlikely to be acquired except by the most determined alcoholic.

Heaps of coconut husks are piled on the canal side or ferried in boats. To make coir, the husks are soaked in water for several days until the fibres are soft enough to separate and dry. Simple rope-making factories are set up in the yards between houses. Two women suspend bags filled with coir from their necks. After attaching a strand to a spinning wheel, both walk swiftly backwards as another woman or a child turns the wheel. As they retreat, they deftly manipulate the tufts of coir with their fingers, and magically it emerges from the

bag as a twisted string. When they reach the end of the yard the two strands are wound round another wheel and one of the women walks forward, wielding a paddle in each hand to spin the strands into a twenty meter loop of two-ply string, which is then lifted off and laid on a mounting pile.

At least three different types of kingfisher swoop across the canals, glittering like precious gems. White cattle egrets populate the paddies and Brahminy kites float on the air above pink handkerchief trees, white hibiscus, scarlet poinsettia, blue plumbago, black-eyed Susans, begonias, the vibrant coloured leaves of croton, red and pink water lilies as big as plates filling the ponds, purple flowering vines twisting round the huts and yellow climbers and red tassels peeping through the palms - together with the occasional satellite dish. Sometimes the houses clump into a straggling village linked by small bridges vaulting the side channels. The more substantial homes often echo the design of our kettuvallam, with a raised ridge on the roof tipping up at the ends into Oriental-style eaves with a carved wooden architrave and topped with finials. The village of Champakalam boasted a substantial early Catholic church in colonial style, painted blue with traditional pigments, also a swish jewellery shop, barbers, tailors, an ironmonger and a miller who sensibly wore a scarf over his mouth as he ground rice and chilli. Busy ferries link these isolated communities to each other and to the major towns.

Reclining in our rattan chairs in the shade, or stretched on cushions in the sunny prow, we enjoyed our two-day journey so much that we negotiated a 60-kilometre extension from Alleppy to Kollam over the next two days. As on a motorway, signposts with distance indications pointed our way through the watery maze. Arriving in Kollam in the late afternoon, we discovered there was a train departing within a couple of hours for Madurai in south-east Tamil Nadu. But we already had sleeping car reservations on another leaving at 02:30 am and we decided to stick to this plan. There was method in this early-morning madness: it meant we would cross the western ghats by daylight and so enjoy the views. The problem was how to enjoy the hours now intervening before departure. A reconnoitre of the honestly named Rail View Hotel opposite the station was not encouraging, so when the lads offered us an extra meal by lamplight and the use of the bedroom on the boat, as well as fetching a cold bottle of beer - we gratefully fattened their tip. They even stayed up late and went out by torchlight to fetch an autorickshaw. And so in the early hours we stumbled over the men sleeping somehow sprawled vertically across the steps of the Kollam railway station, the families camped within it and the persistent beggar ladies on the platform, boarded our train, evicted the squatters from our berths and went soundly to sleep, mission accomplished. But India, of course, had a surprise in store for us at dawn.

9. The Temples of Tamil Nadu



We awoke to a spectacular sunrise vista: the train was passing through a plain stretching towards a distant mountain. The morning sun glinted on thousands of silvery propellers turning lazily in the breeze. As far as the eye could see the plain was populated by wind-driven generators. India produces two percent of its power in this way, and it looked as though it all comes from here. Wherever here was. We were disorientated. The problem was the plain. We had expected to wake up in the middle of the western ghats which separate Kerala from Tamil Nadu, but the only mountain on view was sliding off the rear edge of the carriage window. At the first halt the mystery deepened. It was a major station called Nagercoil Junction. But we could find it nowhere on our map along the west-east track between Kollam and Madurai. It was not until half-an-hour later, when we were more fully awake and the train was trundling north through the rice paddies - which require a *level* landscape - that the penny dropped. We discovered Nagercoil at the bottom of our map, at the southernmost tip of the Indian subcontinent. We had dallied seven hours in Kollam and boarded a train in the middle of the night just so we could see the ghats by daylight. But we had failed to check the route. Instead of going west, this train headed south to circumnavigate the mountains. Behind the wind farm we had glimpsed the final heave of the mountain range before it plunged into the sea. We consoled ourselves with the thought that we had now been to both the southern and

northern extremities of the subcontinent (the latter on a trek in Ladakh in 1992) and set our faces towards the famous temples of Tamil Nadu.

What, more temples? One could easily tire of them, but we have so far avoided a surfeit. The trick is never to hire a guide. A guide is like a recorded message. He will tell you what he has memorised. He will go on at great length about some ancient emperor with an unpronounceable name, or one of the countless whimsical manifestations of Shiva or Vishnu, or relate some preposterous episode from the endless chronicles of the Mahabharata, while you stand with your neck cricking and your eyes squinting at a worn and indistinct fragment of sculpture twenty metres above your head, wondering if you are looking at the one he's talking about. If you manage to shoehorn in a question about something that's caught your interest, his English suddenly deteriorates and his reply is monosyllabic. You proceed at his pace, in the direction he sets, and with his constant jabber you never get the opportunity to savour the atmosphere of the place - or just sit down and think about it. Impromptu guides at the less well-visited sites can be more helpful; we have had useful chats with a gardener, a priest, temple guardians and even a curator employed by the dreaded Architectural Survey of India. But you can find more than you ever want to know about the *facts* of a temple, with an equal level of incomprehension, in any of the little guidebooks on sale. (Never pay more than half the price printed on the cover). What kept us interested was the *feel* of the temples. And in this respect every one was different.

The Sri Meenakshi temple in Madurai is appealingly secular. If you want to see only one temple choose this one. It is set in the midst of a bazaar, its towering gopurams (gateways) peopled with tiers of flamboyant figures of gods, animals and dancing girls painted in lurid nursery colours. Within the dark vaulted halls of this sand castle architecture is a scene from "Gormenghast". Priests with shaven heads wearing saffron robes, and ordinary people, too, sit meditating, while others stand gossiping, fortune tellers squat and people picnic on the slabs. Some faces are rapt with devotion; others could be waiting for a bus. There is constant turmoil. Pilgrims descend the steps of the vast tank to immerse themselves. Squads of men wearing black skirts, a dazed expression and nothing else trot through the passageways wielding silver maces and banging on drums. They pause every few paces to stoop before a shrine, dropping offerings of flowers or coconut milk on the pavement and touching their foreheads and chanting. A tinny blast from a couple of trumpets heralds the arrival of idols of Shiva and Meenakshi lurching by on palanquins shouldered by teams of men. As they pass people stop, press their palms together and bow their heads. Large stone idols lurk around every corner. Many are dressed in gorgeous silks and heaped with fresh flowers. An elephant, richly caparisoned, obsessively sways its foot while its keeper holds out his hand for offerings. Trays of candles are displayed for sale, to be lit and placed before a deity, just as in a church, and people anoint their foreheads with ash, just as Catholics do on Ash Wednesday.

Many of the rituals resonate with the practices of western religions - people prostrate themselves before Christian statues too - but others are unique. How does one explain the custom of hurling pats of butter through the gloom at

a graven image garlanded with marigolds? The devotional aim was erratic and gobs of butter hung everywhere - on the railings, on the pillars, on the ceiling. A handy stall supplied the ammunition at two rupees per pat, and for good measure a priest smeared a bowlful across the sculpture's chest. Many other performances seemed quite individual and obsessive, perhaps even made up on the spot - people walking round and round statues, spinning on their heels, or gesticulating in a precise manner, while smearing idols or various parts of their own anatomies with brightly coloured pastes. The halls teem with commerce: tradesmen sell the offerings of vivid powders, fruit, coconuts and heaps of garlands of flowers and sundry tawdry religious artefacts; other merchants flog household wares and cheap plastic toys: model cars and motorbikes and guns. This is the lot who were tossed out of Palestinian temples in AD31. Could anyone ever understand what is going on here?



The Rock Fort Temple in Trichy (Tiruchirappalli), hewn from a rocky outcrop, is a towering engineering achievement which offers a distant view of the stepped gopurams of two other temples rising above palm trees like Mayan pyramids in a jungle. Each is set within a series of concentric walled rectangles and one must penetrate through several gates before it is clear where bazaar ends and temple proper begins.

After the trafficked inferno of Trichy, Tanjore, lying quietly in green countryside, is a relief. Its Brihadishwara temple is a large historic site constructed of red sandstone and set in a spacious walled area with some greenery and shade trees. In Kumbakonam, the three small temples are again built into an everyday market, with the result that more than once we removed our sandals and padded about in bare feet quite unnecessarily. A temple elephant obediently accepted offerings with his rhythmically swinging trunk. The bananas he stuffed into his mouth, while the coins, with a deft sideways crook of the trunk, were conveyed to the rear, with the elbowed motion of a backhander, to the open palm of his keeper squatting beneath. The temple at the nearby village of Darasuram is a virtual ruin approached by buckboards laid over a disused pool. The Gangakondacholapuram temple, an ancient sandstone structure, presented a linguistic challenge until its curator explained that Chola was a historic regional dynasty and hence Gangakondacholapuram means "Ganges coming to Chola place". That is because of the belief that every twelve years the tank is filled with water from the Ganges. The Ganges lies 1500 kilometres to the north, and how it diverts here or where it is during the other eleven years is a question unresearched by religious dogma. The courtyard of the Citambaran temple was as large as a playing field, consequently a group of kids was using it for a spirited game of cricket; the devout pilgrims who were sleeping, lunching and begging in the shade of the surrounding colonnade seemed unconcerned.

Tamil Nadu has also added to our list of funky hotels. Alighting at the Trichy bus station after a white-knuckled three-hour ride, we hopped into an autorickshaw, pleased to have bargained a 30p fare to the Hotel Ashby. We were driven just across the road and deposited in a decrepit motel built around a forlorn garden, where tea was served in grubby crockery. But the room was not infested, except by mosquitoes, and we negotiated access to the electrical switch governing the hot water supply, and upon reflection, perhaps it was worth 30p to be taken safely across the road against the turbulent Trichy traffic stream.

We tried to book in advance at the state-owned Tamil Nadu hotel in Tanjore by telephoning from the state-owned Tamil Nadu hotel in Trichy. Alas, we were told it was fully booked. Nevertheless, we dropped in there. Built around a central garden courtyard, the hotel had a decaying institutional air, and at 9:00 am was strangely quiet. Not only was a shabby but decent garden floor room available, with an extra little cell presumably for our servant, but the place was virtually deserted; we saw only one other guest.

The Hotel Rayas in Kumbakonam, on the other hand, is a straightforward commercial enterprise, yet took the spiritual precaution of purifying its restaurant by permitting a chap to march through it chanting and sprinkling red powder on to a bed of glowing coals swinging in a metal basket, thus creating a powerful stink of incense and a thick cloud of smoke. We were taking our tea there at the time and this procedure provoked an intensive bout of coughing. The waiters leapt to their feet to throw open windows and switch on fans to disperse the cleansing effects of this ritual puja as quickly as possible.

We have had both the best and the worst meals of the trip so far in Tanjore - both on the same day. Best was the thali served at a street cafe called Sathars. I've ordered thalis in Indian restaurants in London without realising the essential role they play in the national cuisine. Thalīs, or "meals" as they are often called, are Indian fast-food. They are only served at certain hours, usually lunch time. They are fast because they are already prepared (apart from the chapatis which take a few seconds to fry) and are simply ladled out by a series of one-task-dedicated waiters. The meals come in veg or non-veg mode in a row of little stainless steel cups, usually served on a thali - a rimmed metal tray. In this canteen filled with local men lunching at plain tables, vegetable thalis are served on a banana leaf, which is simply folded up and discarded afterwards. We were given six different cups of curries and soups and sauces, plus rice and chapatis and poppadums, with an endless cycle of refills, for 22p. Curd was 5p extra. The worst meal was supper that same evening - an insipid curry of stale cashews and frozen prawns, plus a tough mutton rogan josh, elegantly served by red-jacketed waiters at a frightfully expensive and virtually empty five-star hotel named the Parisutham (or the "Paracetamol" as we henceforth called it) absurdly located in this out-of-the-way town. As we left, a band by the swimming pool struck up "Jingle Bells" on Indian instruments.

Tamil Nadu is technically a dry state. You can nevertheless consume alcoholic beverages, but they sure take the fun out of it. At posh hotels like the Paracetamol they will bring you a bottle of beer discreetly wrapped in a napkin.

But usually you have to patronise a seedy “permit room”. There may be one in your hotel, but it is likely to have a separate outside entrance with an armed guard standing outside it. Having overcome these hindrances, you stumble into total darkness until your eyes adjust to the murky illumination of red and blue-painted 10-watt bulbs. From the gloom emerges a vision of a crowd of silent Indian men who appear to be suffering from clinical depression. Still, alcoholism in Tamil Nadu is no joke. A group of local women have organised a movement to lobby against the drink interests; while we were here the response of the liquor barons was to murder two of them.

10. Pondi to Puri



We tried to stay at the ashram. Honest, we did. Pondicherry, the former French colony on the Coromandel Coast, is virtually a company town controlled by the affluent Aurobindo Ashram. It operates factories, schools, offices, cultural centres and guest houses and owns most of the choice seafront property. Our guide book rhapsodised about the ashram's Park Guest House, a large austere structure right on the sea: it was clean, cheap and the rooms had stunning views. As these hotels exist to accommodate devotees of the faith we were prepared to abide by the rules on the notice which the counter clerk set before us: no smoking, no alcohol, and a 10:30pm curfew. What we were not prepared to endure was the arrogance of the idle desk staff who kept us waiting without apparent reason for ten minutes, meanwhile refusing to reply to simple questions. An Indian family submitted meekly to this insolence. Presumably masochism is part of the deal. We turned on our heels and booked the last room in a heritage hotel which had tempted us earlier. "L'Orient" was a new and delightful conversion of a stately villa. Built around an interior courtyard where meals are served, it is tastefully furnished with antique furniture, Rajasthan woven rugs in bold colour combinations, old framed maps and prints and amusing figurines and curios. Our large, high-ceilinged room had a four-poster bed and tall windows with shutters opening on to a quiet lane.

The French came here in 1673, squabbled with the Dutch and British for centuries, and outlasted them both. They did not cede Pondicherry until 1954, six years after independence. Nevertheless, it appears as if they never penetrated more than 300 metres inland. The seafront area could be an unfashionable resort on the Cote d'Azur in the 1950s. A frisky sea breaks on a magnificent paved promenade. A broad, empty avenue lined with palms and tamarisks runs along it. Buildings in colonial or art deco style are painted white or in soft pastels. A tricolour waves against a seamless blue sky over the French consulate. There is a douane, too, and restaurants offer excellent French-influenced menus with imported wines. Church bells peal on Sunday morning, the coffee stalls sell croissants and baguettes, the Indian policemen wear red kepis and the Indian barristers stream out of the law courts in white wigs and black gowns with white collar tabs. The rues have French names, and under a pollarded tree an elderly Indian gentleman wearing a beret perches on a scooter gossiping in French with a crony. Yet 300 metres inland across a canal - or rather a smelly drain - the random chaos of a typical Indian town ensues.

A cyclone hit this coast while we were in Kerala. Large trees still lay helter-skelter, some with sections of pavement attached, and several of the rooftop restaurants were busily replacing their thatched coverings. At lunch beneath a tree in a courtyard a crow shat squarely on my head. "That's a lucky omen" trilled a woman at the next table. I was doubly lucky, because a few moments later the crow did it again. And sure enough, that evening I was racked with rigors. My resident doctor advised me that it was unlikely to be malaria while I, with no appetite, watched her munch her way through fresh crudités, Keralan prawn curry, ratatouille, pommes frites and a chocolate mousse which she assured me was the best she had ever tasted.

We aimed to travel the next day by rail to Chennai (Madras). From there we were booked on the night train to Berhampur in Orissa. But after shaking and shivering through a tropical night I decided that an all-day journey involving three taxi transfers, a bus and two trains was too challenging and we hired a car instead, troubled only by the report in yesterday's newspaper that the Chennai-Berhampur line had been completely blocked by a train wreck.

Arriving at Chennai at nightfall in another nightmare scene of traffic congestion, I allowed us to be taken in hand by a railway porter, which was a mistake, because he led us to the ordinary waiting area rather than the first class waiting room. (Yes, we had decided to splash out, because it's a 21-hour journey). Apparently the train wreck had been cleared because the Chennai-Howrah Mail was listed on the electronic notice board, in Tamil, Hindi and English. After experiencing new worst-ever all-India meal distinctions, a soggy veg cutlet and an extremely tired iddly vada at the stand-up fast food counter - food which virtually ricocheted from counter to mouth to wastebin - we discovered the first class waiting room. It was upstairs; probably the porter had not wanted to carry our luggage up there. We did. But the porter had not yet received his tip, so when our train was ready for boarding he came and found us. When I rewarded him suitably he created a ruckus and I had to shut our compartment door on him.

Not checking one's E-mail is like not opening a buff envelope from the Inland Revenue: it can create problems. We disembarked at the large Orissa town of Berhampur because Catherine Cross, who is Overseas Director for the charity Sightsavers International, had offered to arrange for us to visit a project there which it supports, the People's Rural Education Movement (PREM). She had enquired by E-mail and when we heard nothing we sent two more messages. After a fortnight, no response. And no one had the telephone number. So, we decided to stay at the nearby resort of Gopalpur-on-Sea, where we could enjoy a beach break if the visit fell through. At the Sea Breeze Hotel, a simple concrete structure built right on the beach, we were the only guests. Our Spartan room opened onto a veranda and we went to sleep by the light of a full moon and the sound of waves breaking on the shore.

The morning sun revealed a raffish, straggling bazaar of malodorous lanes heaped with rubbish, plus a few guest houses and basic cafes, fringing a magnificent treeless beach. There was a romantic view of the lateen sails of fishing canoes on the horizon but the tideline reeked of the spoil of the fishermen, including their excreta. As always in India it was hard to know what was being built and what was falling down, but here several building collapsing into the sea were clearly the result of the cyclone that devastated Orissa in 1999.

No one we asked had ever heard of PREM. The fallback position was Gopalpur's only posh hotel, where we made telephone contact. The staff at PREM had never heard of us. The Director had been away for a couple of weeks. What about the E-mails? When the Director is away he locks up his computer. We tried to back off gracefully. They understandably got it into their heads that we were important representatives from the funding organisation, and promised to lay on a visit for us that afternoon. For several hours there was no further news, so we watched the fishermen landing their sailing canoes through the surf and shaking showers of glittering sardines from their nets. A few of these tribal people wore traditional woven conical hats, which, allegedly, serve to break the force of the surf. When we returned there had been a phone message: someone would meet us at our hotel at 4:30pm, which seemed a bit late to start a tour. As darkness fell an earnest and charming Indian couple arrived on our seaside balcony, somewhat excessively clad against the evening chill, we thought. A woolly never looks good over a sari and he was wearing a leather jacket. Pulling documents and colour photographs from their case, they gave us an excellent presentation about PREM's ophthalmological role. Briefly, they recruit and train local people to survey and identify people suffering from eye problems. Those who are treatable are referred to specialists, the incurably blind are encouraged to learn a simple handicraft or trade (stitching leaves together with wood slivers to make disposable plates earns 85p a day) which enables them to contribute to their own support and regain personal dignity within their family and community. It seems an ideal conduit to direct international funding usefully to local needs and we were very impressed. Particularly when we discovered, to our intense mortification, that she had ridden pillion on a motorbike behind her husband for 60 kilometres to reach us and they were now about to make the return journey in the dark.

To get to Puri without hassles we hired a car and our landlord cadged a free lift to visit the Jagannath temple. This is the home of the famous “car” festival, during which idols are dragged through the streets in colossal carts, from which the English word “juggernaut” has derived. Puri also gives access to the remote Sun Temple of Konark which simulates a chariot resting on huge stone wheels. Because it is a destination for pilgrims and backpackers, Puri has a relaxed atmosphere. The South-eastern Railway Hotel could not have been further laid back without falling down. One of the first purpose-built hotels in India, it maintains the traditions of the Raj without actually delivering the service. A sweeping lawn looks towards the sea, wicker loungers repose on the veranda and your tea is brought by a flunky dressed from head to toe in white. But though his head is crowned by a turban, his toes are encased by Reebok. There is a bar and a billiard room, but both are padlocked. You can eat in a sombre dining room, but it will be a lukewarm school dinner with spices. If you order a beer a runner, or rather a stroller, will be dispatched half a kilometre to the nearest liquor stall to fetch it.

The days were fresh and sunny, like a breezy June in Britain, yet the inhabitants were trudging about as if they expected snow, wrapped in shawls, woollies and blankets, with towels or balaclavas on their heads. It made one shiver to look at them. We were no longer in the tropics and cold weather lay ahead.

11. Down the Ganges



In a fortnight 70 million people will begin to congregate on this site. On one day alone 30 million will arrive. It is expected to be the largest crowd of humanity ever to assemble at one place and time. They will cross this dirty strand to immerse themselves at the confluence of the sacred rivers Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati - or as near as they can push to this point, the Kilaghat, at Allahabad. The sadhus (holy men) and pilgrims are already beginning to trickle in, and a vast tented city is rising on this stretch of desolate wasteland. The army and police are thick on the ground; there is great anxiety about a possible attack by terrorists agitating for an independent Kashmir, or other Muslim groups outraged by the continuing insistence of fundamentalist Hindus who control the BJP party to erect a permanent temple on the site of the Ayodhya mosque destroyed by a Hindu mob in 1992, an event which provoked riots all across India, causing the death of over 3,000 people.

The exact join of the two visible rivers is known as the sangam and you can see a clear line between the shallow brown Ganges and the deeper, greenish Yamuna. It is further defined by a string of small boats moored to poles which stretches 300 metres out into the flow. On the shallow, muddy side people stand splashing in water up to their waists. On the other side of the boats people have to be supported as they wrap their saris or lunghis around their bodies and dunk

themselves from platforms. We floated past serenely reclining on mattresses in a 20-foot open boat powered by a pair of oarsmen seated in the bow. It was the start of our five-day cruise down the Ganges to what is thought to be the oldest city in the world, Varanasi.

We had seen a newspaper cutting publicising Ganges cruises offered by a British adventure travel firm, so we knew such a journey was possible. It took a couple of weeks for us to raise effective E-mail contact with a Delhi travel agent we know, but when we arrived at Delhi, at a hastily summoned conference in the Wimpy Bar in Connaught Place (a venue of ultra-sophistication to the New Delhi jeunesse d'oree) Mohan was able to arrange a trip within three days. Which was exactly the time we needed to secure our Vietnamese visa. It was while sitting in the sun on the security guard's chair waiting for the Vietnamese Embassy to open that we rang a Delhi friend, Ruth Wooldridge. It turned out that she lives around the corner and five minutes later she was with us, extending an invitation to stay at her home. This was an offer we could not refuse, particularly since we would have to visit the Embassy twice more on ensuing days, and our hotel was a frantic autorickshaw ride distant.

The Wooldridges live in leafy Chanakyapuri in a pleasant garden villa surrounded by a high wall and, like most of the residences in this area - which is favoured by the staff of the British High Commission - is protected by 24-hour guards because of the dissident Kashmiri threat. (Two days after we left Delhi they attacked the Red Fort, killing three people.) Mike Wooldridge is the India correspondent for the BBC and works all hours, producing reports for television, radio and the Internet as well. We saw more of him on the television screen than we did in the flesh. Ruth is busy providing hospice care through a group of local people which she has organised. They visit the terminally ill throughout the jhuggis (slums where people live in tar paper shacks), trying to make their last days more comfortable and counselling their families. They are making slow but definite progress in persuading both families and the medical profession that a dignified death at home is preferable to absorbing the life savings of the poor to fund heroic and futile management in hospitals.

Our train journey to Delhi from Puri had taken 33 hours, and four days later we were backtracking on the night train to Allahabad. By 9 am we were on the strand waiting for our boat to arrive. It was tardy, so we took a ramble through the local fort and shrine, the highlight of which was a living sacred cow with an extra leg dangling limply from its shoulder. Holy cow!

Eventually two boats arrived. One conveyed us, our guide Ajay, and our four-armed engine; the other was the "kitchen boat", transporting the cook, the assistant cook and another two oarsmen, plus a heap of vegetables, bottled water and tea bags. Total: two passengers and seven crew. This sounds expensive, and it was, particularly as the boats have to be trucked back upstream from our destination.

As the crow flies, it's about 200 kilometres from Allahabad to Varanasi. But the Ganges twists and doubles back, so that as the dolphin swims, it's almost

twice as far. The river flows at three to four knots, varying from a few hundred metres across to the size of a large lake. Mysterious whirlpools pockmark its surface. The oarsmen row steadily for hours at a time, and when the wind is behind, they hoist a small scrap of sail. The Ganges abounds in bird life: white vultures, pied kingfishers, spoonbills, open-billed and painted storks. The banks vary from steep banks covered in elephant grass and reeds, to gentle slopes cultivated with rice, mustard seed and vegetables, to barren sand cliffs up to ten metres high. However desolate and isolated, there are people everywhere, bathing, washing clothes or fishing. Huts and villages perch on the skyline amid trees and white temple spires under fluttering red or orange flags.



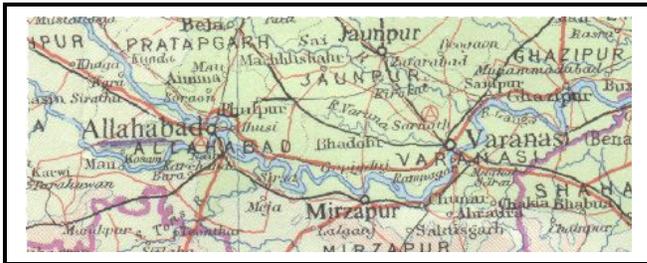
As the sun sets and the air chills, the two boats nose into shore and moor to a bamboo pole thrust into the river bed. Our small tent is put up and we clamber in with our packs and the sleeping bags we've borrowed from the travel agent. Meanwhile the gas cooker flames on the kitchen boat, a small plastic table and stools are set up and after the stars come out dinner is served to us and Ajay by torchlight under the faint illumination of a crescent moon. The night is cold and the sand is firm underneath one's back, but we are asleep by eight. Long before dawn we have padded out over the sands for the morning ritual and are waiting for our bed tea and basins of hot water for washing. The crew sleep on the boats and bathe in the Ganges.

Days and nights pass seamlessly. We breakfast as dawn breaks, and after the senior oarsman has blessed the boat and placed incense on its prow, we row towards the bright red rising sun, still wearing all the layers of clothing we have. Swallows and swifts pop out from rows of holes in the sand cliffs and skim the surface of the water. Gradually we peel off our outer layers of clothing; by 11 am the day is burning hot, though pleasant in the shade of our awning.

The river is often glassy and still and at any state, scummy. Marigold garlands, the residue of funerals, float with us. Fresh water dolphins, up to six feet long, explode merrily out of the brown river. Suddenly hundreds of ducks arise from the river in a dark, scudding cloud. Through the river haze a never-ending panorama of peasant life unfolds: camels unload sand from barges, boats no larger than ours crammed with people, bicycles and motorbikes, ferry across, fishermen dip V-shaped nets into the water from the shore, piles of ash from funeral pyres litter the shore.

The only sounds are the screech of birds, the regular splosh of oars, and the Hindi chat of our two garrulous young oarsmen. The kitchen boat pulls alongside to pass over elevenses, lunch and afternoon tea. The cook concocts an

amazing variety of delicious meals from his stock of vegetables. At four p.m. the sun starts dropping towards the horizon, the chattering parakeets fly to their sand cliff dwellings and V-shaped skeins of water birds sweep across the sky. If the wind is still, dinner on the sands will be candle-lit. The nights are always cold - and noisy. We are stirred from sleep by trains rumbling by across the river, wailing long hoots, by endless chanting broadcast from a village mosque or temple a mile away, by music, someone chopping wood at midnight, or the plash of eroding river banks collapsing into the water. Before dawn people chat as they come to the river for their ritual bathing. One morning a half-nude chap prattled to us at length in Hindi. Ajay interpreted: he was telling us the meaning of life. And what was that? "You are born, there is middle age, and then you die."



Mirzapur is a dirt poor town. We climbed the steep ghats past tiny shrines to wander down narrow bazaar lanes. Most of the shops sold items of worship: beautifully scalloped piles of vermilion powder, chalks, lengths of red cloth and religious trinkets.

Others held heaps of puffed or flaked rice. There were dozens of such merchants, stocking identical merchandise. How could any of them earn a living? Only the sweet shops seemed to be doing a thriving trade, and at one of these a crew member bought hot milk in a plastic bag. Beneath some of the shops was another stall, only a metre high, with a vendor crouching in the dirt with his meagre wares. Children plagued us in hordes; as often, some of the little girls, with their flashing eyes, despite their matted hair and ragged clothes were unbelievably beautiful.

As we rowed out of Mirzapur in the late afternoon, Ajay informed me that owing to the original late departure we were well behind schedule. Until then I was not aware we had a schedule. He now explained that we would travel well into the night and have dinner on board because the crew wanted to reach Allahabad by 11 the next morning. I replied that, as he was skipper (as well as being the only one who could communicate with the crew) the decision lay in his hands, but we were loth to travel in the dark, when it would be cold, dangerous, and nothing would be visible. We were not, after all, undertaking this journey for the convenience of the crew. (That last sentence, I am somewhat shamefaced to admit, is a direct quote, and I may even have added a Harrumph!) Ajay pulled a long face and there ensued a vigorous discussion across the water between the two drifting boats. As night fell we pulled into shore and erected camp in the usual manner.

At dinner Ajay enquired about the size of the tip I intended to disperse to the crew (and by implication, himself). They were concerned, he said, about the extra hours they would have to put in the next day. Now, those faithful readers who have persevered this far in these chronicles will be aware that I am not a generous advocate of the "pourboire" practice in general, and in particular believe it must have some relation to the quality of the service performed. I told

Ajay that I would reflect on the matter, but as it was his employers, not I, who were responsible for scheduling arrangements, the crew must look to them, not me, if they fancied they were owed extra compensation for turning up late on the first day. Ajay looked doleful once more.

Next morning our shipmates were their usual cheerful selves and pulled mightily at the oars. Towards mid-afternoon a crumbling Rajput fort with an elephant tethered at the gate, straight out of an old engraving, loomed out of the mist. We passed under a pontoon bridge and the templed city hove into view in a shimmering haze like a Turner painting. We two lapsed Christians arrived in India's holiest city on Christmas Day. When we got ashore and I doled out the baksheesh the crew did not exactly give me three rousing cheers, but neither did they throw the rupee notes in the dirt and grind them under their feet.

The travel agent had included a night's lodging and a guided tour the next day before transport to the airport, so suddenly we were thrust into the world of the star-studded hotel and the packaged tour. Why anyone wants to travel all the way to India to sit by the side of a swimming pool reading a Danielle Steele novel in a hotel situated in the air-conditioned cocoon of the Varanasi cantonment is beyond me, but we were grateful for the hot shower.

At 6 am we met Rahi, a tall, smooth "resting" intellectual who made a striking style statement with his long slicked hair, Rayban sunglasses and the Kashmiri shawl over his kurtah pyjamas. Assuming that we just had just got off the plane from Houston, he insisted on sitting us down for a lecture on the culture shock and squalor we would encounter in India. We told him we already knew a cowpat from a chapati, and could he get on with the tour, please. In the car he began to recite from the holy text of the Bhagavad Gita, spiced with quotations from Shelley, Keats and Shakespeare, and expounded some cod Hindu philosophy about the wisdom of accepting what fate sends your way. I replied that this seemed ideal propaganda to keep the masses under control in a repressive society, and that shut him up for a while.

At dawn the ghats have a magical quality. A flotilla of rowboats filled with tourists and pilgrims patrol the waterfront. Hundreds of pinpoints of light flicker on the surface of the water from floating pots of burning butter oil and people descend the steps to bathe and pray in the gloom. After breakfast back at the hotel Rahi re-appeared in a new ensemble: an Indian-patterned waistcoat over an embroidered kurtah and blue jeans, topped off with a red baseball cap and, of course, the shades. He informed us he played the flute to accompany classical dancing, and in that gear I could picture him as a charismatic Pied Piper. He led us through twisting passages to view a mosque, another one the Hindus want to destroy, because it is, inevitably, built on the site of a former Hindu temple, although there is already a generous sufficiency of Hindu temples in Varanasi. (The golden-domed Shiva temple is right next door and almost every other doorway in the old city leads to another temple.) The mosque, therefore, is surrounded by a high metal fence surmounted by barbed wire and patrolled by soldiers armed with World War II bolt-action Enfield rifles.

By now we had made it clear to Rahi that we were not keen on guided tours; he relaxed and allowed us to bumble along the ghats by ourselves. From the river, Varanasi rises vertically in a cluster of ancient towers, moghul arches, domes and stone tracery. The steps of the ghats are crowded with vendors of religious artefacts (including plastic bottles to fill with holy water, just as in Lourdes), flowers, neem twig toothbrushes, T-shirts, fruit and vegetables. Saddhus perform ritual puja or squat under sun umbrellas advising pilgrims, or just sit and meditate. A female saddhu clothed in saffron rambles about sprinkling holy water from a pot. Young westerners hang out on the steps playing chess or thumping on drums. Cows and bullocks wander freely. Kids fly kites and play a game involving hitting a stone with a stick so that it flies up into the air and then whacking it for six.

But mostly the ghats seemed to be a washroom cum laundry cum shitheap cum funeral parlour. The shoreline was lined with people soaping themselves, splashing and spluttering or slapping clothing resoundingly on stones. (One benighted western girl had joined them). Drying garments hung on railings and were spread on the steps. Above a slope covered with drying bed linen a woman was patting cow dung into neat discs for fuel, and stacking them in decorative rows. The final touch is the distinctive fingerprints of the craftswoman on the shit patty.

Cow dung and dust is everywhere, with smoke from ritual fires, the sound of gongs and tinkling bells and the stink of raw sewage. This city of two million souls discharges an enormous quantity of solid waste into the holy river. Most dramatic are the corpses which poor villagers upstream launch into the water because they cannot afford the cost of the ritual burning. Although dead cows, ducks and turtles had accompanied us downriver, we saw no human bodies until here. Two ghats are specifically reserved for funerals. At one of these the state has provided an electric furnace which the poor can use for a fee of 500 rupees (£7.70). It is not much used because tradition insists on dealing through a priest. He will provide the firewood, the ghee (butter oil) and the ceremonial paraphernalia and charge what the traffic will bear. So a death in the family can also plunge it into debt. The corpse is wrapped in white cloth and covered with bright metallic-trimmed cloths (on sale everywhere). It is carried quite casually down the ghats on a green bamboo bier to the waterline, where it is immersed while the still living who have accompanied it stand around and chat. Eventually someone unwraps the head and the mourning relatives (one presumes, though none are dressed in their Sunday best) remove their shoes and take turns splashing river water on its face. Then the head is covered again, the body is lifted onto a pyre which is set alight with a torch, and the stretcher is returned to the hire shop. Everyone wanders off except two chaps, apparently functionaries, who remain behind to tend the bonfires.

12. Meandering back to Mumbai



Christmas and New Year have become festivals in India. Eighteen million Christians are a significant minority, and people with a disposable income are getting into the Christmas card habit and keen to celebrate anyone's holiday. So we knew accommodation would be a problem. At Varanasi airport Chuck whiled away the delay in the phone booth. Sixty per cent success: Orchha hotel unobtainable and every hotel in Diu fully booked for the New Year; but reservations achieved in Mumbai, Sasan Gir and Khajuraho.

No-one knows why the Chandela dynasty built its capital in such an isolated spot as Khajuraho in northern Madhya Pradesh. More than 1000 years later, Khajuraho is still isolated and only the temples remain. They sit on stone platforms, the clusters of curving sikaras - towers - resembling small-scale Chrysler buildings. But it isn't the towers with their simple decoration that tourists shell out \$10 to see. It's the bands of carving below. The usual suspects are there - Shiva, Nandi the bull, Vishnu - but far outnumbered by celestial maidens. On temples the length and breadth of India, females with unrealistic bosoms and scanty clothing stand frozen in ritual poses. Khajuraho's maidens spring to life: they dance, write letters, remove thorns from their feet - any activity which allowed the sculptor to present an elegant shoulder, a sinuous spine, a sensual thrust of the hip. They have charm. And there are the couples.

The athleticism they display is usually reserved for the advanced chapters of sex manuals. (Oldies should not try these positions at home without a safety harness and the supervision of a qualified instructor. Ed.) There are also more specialised activities, though the hands flying to the horrified face of the lady observing the congress with a horse suggests that the Chandelas too regarded such exploits as extracurricular.

The guidebook offered several unconvincing explanations for the eroticism of temple carvings. A more likely proposal came from the guardian of the similarly-adorned Jain temples, a cycle-ride away through the fields. We asked him about the motif which appears, in a thousand minor variants, between the maidens: a mythical beast rampant twists its head to devour a human figure perched on its back, while another figure at its feet pulls its tail or shafts it with a stick. The beast, he said, is Desire; the upper figure cannot resist and is consumed, while the lower one overcomes carnal temptation. So the carvings are a moral primer.

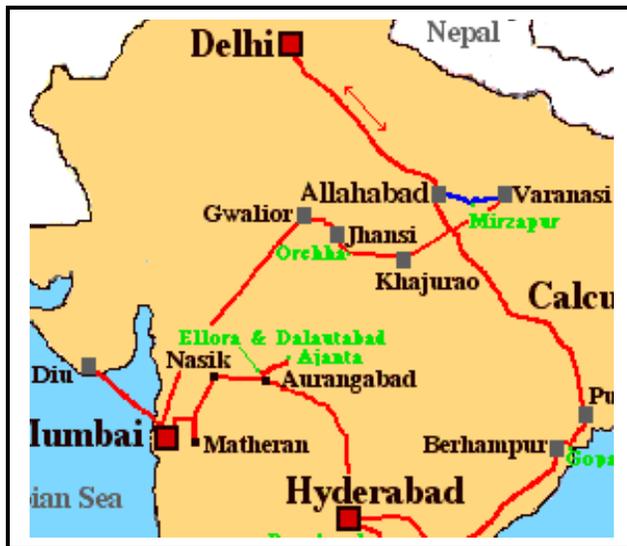
We were putting our sandals back on when a loud oom-pah-pah announced the town band. It led a small crowd, unremarkable until one noticed that many of the men were stark naked. Each carried a kettle of water and bent to sweep the ground in front of him with a thick brush of peacock feathers. No-one seemed to mind our video camera. The man beside me overcame his limited English to explain that these were Jain pilgrims on a coach tour. Jains, like Buddhists, broke away from Hinduism in the 6th century BC, seeking a purer, monotheistic, caste-free religion. Jains place an even higher value on life than Hindus, and some go naked rather than risk an animal being harmed in the making of clothes. Though as Jains are prominent in the business community, it may well be that the pilgrims had shirts and suits in their luggage back in the coach.

In Khajuraho village we paid £8 to stay in the Zen, a hotel made entirely of marble. A marble staircase and marble banister ascended to our huge marble bedroom with a marble bathroom; marble tables occupied the hotel's small marble atrium. Doubtless it is pleasantly cool in summer but at the end of December we were glad of the coals glowing in the karhai set on bricks on the floor while we waited for our dinner. And waited. Eventually the chap who had taken our order reappeared. On questioning, his affirmative Indian head wiggle threatened to reach resonant frequency. It appeared that the order had gone right out of his head during the ascent to the kitchen, inconveniently located on the unfinished third floor of the hotel.

The brochures, the guidebooks, and our friends the Wooldridges assured us that the Sheesh Mahal Hotel in Orchha was not to be missed. It is part of the palace built by Bir Singh Deo in 1603 so that Prince Jehangir could enjoy the company of his dancing girl away from the disapproving eyes of his father, the Emperor Akbar. It sounded just the place to squeeze in between Khajuraho and our flight from Gwalior to Mumbai. Had our travel agent in Delhi had more success than Chuck in getting through? As the hotel is run by Madhya Pradesh Tourist Development Corporation we raised the MPTDC representative in

Khajuraho from his afternoon nap and, upon receiving our assurance that we would pay for the call, he agreed to phone. On our second visit to his office he got a connection. The Sheesh Mahal was 'fully packed', he reported after putting the phone down. Unfortunately he had failed to enquire if we were part of the packing.

Unreserved but undeterred, we set off on a five-hour rattle through the agricultural landscape of Madhya Pradesh. Crash, bang. Tyre puncture. An hour's delay watching the repairs to the bus, observing village life and drinking chai passes much more agreeably than the same wait in an airport. We scrambled off at the Orchha turnoff, grabbed the only autorickshaw and by mid-afternoon were crossing the moat and labouring up the hill to the palace. It was fully packed and we were not included. So we engaged the autorickshaw driver to wait a few hours while we looked around Orchha and then to take us the 18 kilometres to Jhansi before nightfall.



Orchha's palace stands on a rock in a curve of the river. Its high walls are adorned with walkways and balconies, all cased with jhali (stone latticework) windows. Moghul cupolas cap the belvederes. Fountains once played in the courtyards and enamel work and paintings adorned the walls. Was the visual complexity of these elements designed to please the eye and tease the mind so that the women of the zenana resented less being prisoners behind those lovely grilles? Did they peer wistfully through the jhalis to watch the

village women washing in the river and the vultures nesting on the belvederes of the nearby cenotaphs?

The Jhansi Hotel, which we reached just after sundown, had plenty of rooms. And character. Antlers over the doors, 15 foot high ceilings, threadbare bits of carpet, electrics of the style we have come to call 'Prince Philip', and hot water which ran out halfway through the first shower.

Tables, all laid, filled the cavernous dining room, and waiters sped to and fro, but presumably to keep warm as there was only one other diner. Light from a single bulb over the bar at one end and the reception desk at the other failed to illuminate the table where we sat wrapped in all our woollies peering at the menu by the light of a candle. The service was a cross between Basil Fawlty intensity and Miguel lack of capiche. When they came, the chicken masala, dhal makhani, veg. raitha and parathas were excellent.

In India, accommodation often comes with the job. Rickshaw drivers sleep in their vehicles, temple guardians in the shrine, hotel staff wherever there is floor space. In the chilly early morning we picked our way over heaps of blankets to breakfast. The masala dosa wallah was still asleep so we ordered the travellers' staple, toast-butter-jam, and ate it by candlelight.

Gwalior is a mere two hours by train from Jhansi - just time to fight your way to your seat. Before our early afternoon flight to Mumbai we had time to visit Gwalior's hilltop fort. As we stepped outside the station the touts descended. Chuck emerged from a Mozartian solo and chorus with a deal for a taxi to the fort and then the airport.

The fort sprawls over a long outcrop, enclosing barracks and water tanks, temples, pavilions and the Man Singh Palace. This has huge studded doors to resist elephant charges and vertiginous views through the boiling oil slots to the town far below, yet it is whimsically decorated with bands of sky-blue and leaf-green inlay flowers and tigers and a row of nursery ducks.

Air travel, we decided, is the worst way to get about India. Our planes were delayed for hours, and airports compare poorly with the roadside or railway station for food and entertainment while one waits. We found ourselves being herded by package tour guides trying to include us in their headcounts. Seen from the outside, Gwalior's smart little terminal promised well, but inside desuetude was taking its toll, even before the building was finished. Signs saying 'restaurant' and 'viewing lounge' led to nowhere, the toilet doors had been ripped out, and the fish in the murky tank looked as hungry as we were. As in Greece, we wondered what had happened to the artistry and craftsmanship of the past. The airport manager chalked the ever-receding departure time on the board and ordered cups of tea for the passengers. As he handles only ten flights a week he is probably glad of the activity.

Chuck phoned the Hotel Sapna from the tarmac at Mumbai airport to confirm that we would be arriving late. Nevertheless when we got there they claimed no knowledge of our reservation and had only a single room available. It being 10.30 we took it. They offered an extra bed, but it couldn't be fitted in. Next day they admitted having taken our reservation but said 'it was not confirmed'.

Leopold's is a Mumbai institution. Its 1930s decor and extensive menu attracts backpackers, Indian intellectuals, families out shopping and hucksters of all nationalities. Chips are not compulsory but are so popular that the waiter brought Chuck a plateful in mistake for juice. We breakfasted on spicy scrambled eggs, and came back for a fish lunch. After an afternoon searching the back bazaars for cassettes for the video camera, we treated ourselves at another Mumbai institution. The Kulfi Centre is a window counter across the street from Chowpatty Beach. Twenty flavours of kulfi (Indian ice cream) are listed on the walls, and the day's special, saffron with dried fruits, was added in chalk. Waiters take orders from the patrons milling on the pavement or parked in cars at the kerbside. A man sitting cross-legged in the window cuts the kulfi and

weighs the portions on a beam balance, and the waiter finds the customer in the crowd and delivers the kulfi on a paper plate. Delicious.

When we checked out of the Sapna, they presented us with a bill for a double room. We refused to pay. They then proposed to charge us an extra bed supplement. We refused to pay. But somehow the charge for a single room was only slightly less than for a double. Honour satisfied on both sides, more or less. Our only remaining worry was finding a bed in Diu on New Year's Eve.

We were in Diu by midday. The autorickshaw from the airport took us to the hotel of our first choice and we were much relieved to find they had magically acquired a vacant room since Chuck's phone call from Varanasi. Normally only a trickle of travellers make their way to Diu to enjoy the island's long beaches, the Portuguese fort and the activity of the fishing port. But at holiday time crowds of visitors stream across the causeway from Gujerat, which is a dry state, to soak up Diu's duty-free liquor. The town was overrun with hordes of slightly disinhibited young men. In India one is endlessly asked 'What is your name?' 'What is your country?' in a spirit of friendly curiosity. On New Year's Eve the enquiries had a belligerent air. Service collapsed in the restaurants. Feeling like Oldies, we retired early to slumber the New Year in.

≡ For American readers, Prince Philip made a derogatory comment about Indian electricians which got him into hot water for being un-PC. Ed.

13. Gujerat



It was just like being back in the army. Messing about in jeeps, engaged in mindless activity poorly planned and ineptly carried out with inadequate tools. We were either shivering with cold or broiling with the heat, we were awake at uncivilised hours, and everything was covered in dust. We were in the desert 60 kilometres west of Bhuj in the Rann of Kutch, Gujerat, and about the same distance from the Pakistan border. The Indian Air Force flew MIG jets overhead regularly to remind us.

We spent ten days with on an Earthwatch project studying the Indian wolf. Earthwatch is a charity which has found a clever way of funding environmental research projects: prosperous westerners are invited to assuage their guilt at chewing up an inordinate share of the world's resources by paying an inordinate amount of money to give hands-on assistance under uncomfortable conditions to worthy field projects. The wolf is a major predator in this area and because local farmers blame it for the loss of sheep and cattle, they are not averse to scattering poison about. The idea is that a study of its habits and those of competing carnivores will enable a plan for its survival. Sounds good on paper, but so does the army.

We had got about as far west as you can go in India the hard way, by narrow gauge rail and by bus. At the last moment before leaving duty-free Diu

my tour leader advised me that Gujerat is a rigorously dry state, so I added a bottle of rum to our encumbrances. As usual I insisted we should be at the train station in plenty of time - we could have lunch there I argued. When the autorickshaw turned off the main road down a dirt track I told Judith it must be a short-cut to the railway station. It was the entrance to the station. A few labourers were slumbering on sacks and there was the overpowering smell of embalmed fish: Bombay Duck. There were no restaurants, no snack stalls, not even a fruit barrow. We found a stationmaster eating his tiffin in a dusty cupboard, but he said he would not issue tickets until half-an-hour before the train arrived. Which, because of my toilet-training anxieties, was some little time yet.

As it happened he did not open his ticket window until the train was in the station, and we had to scramble on board in haste. We probably could have caught up with it, because this was a four-carriage country train with hard wooden seats and holes in the floor which proceeded at not much more than a slow trot. It took 3 1/2 hours to cover the 100 kilometres to Sasan Gir. We were entertained by a rural family of six that clambered on at one stop and, in front of a sign which read "Please do not block the passage with luggage", proceeded to build a pile composed of several large tin trunks, bulging feed bags, an enormous cloth-wrapped bundle the size of a compact car, a few large kitchen pots and two 15-foot stacks of poles - and then climbed on top of it. Fortunately they reversed the process at the next stop and, as far as I could see, never showed anyone a ticket.

We were also invited to tea by sign language by a woman and her daughter who were the family of the points man at Sasan Gir station. We pleaded another engagement. I was uncertain which hotel I had booked into, owing to a confusion of telephone numbers and the similar names of the rudimentary state-run enterprise and the very posh establishment next door. I was also worried about toting our luggage - the guide book, ominously, mentioned a ten-minute walk. No cars or rickshaws were visible at the station, but we were greeted by three lads who, I thought, were offering us a bicycle rickshaw. And so it was that we walked up the long drive to the five-star Sasan Gir Hotel, pride of the Tata Group, where westerners invariably arrive in chauffeur-driven Ambassadors, with our luggage piled on the seat of a pedal bike pushed by boy-power. This grand establishment is ideally located on the edge of a wildlife sanctuary, and apart from the fact that the hot water had to be delivered by bucket because the boiler had blown up and the engineer was flying in from Mumbai on the notoriously unpunctual Indian Airlines - and the electricity was off because the grid had failed and the hotel's own generator could not be started because the batteries had gone flat - it was worth every bit of \$110 per night. For some more dollars they organised three jeep safaris for us - at dusk and pre-dawn. We bagged hundreds of spotted deer, dozens of the larger samba deer and nilgai antelopes, some wild boar, langur monkeys, crested hawks, short-toed eagles, treepies, pelicans, a Scops owl and - rare in these parts - a paradise flycatcher with its long white tail sweeping gracefully behind it. The highlights were a leopard which stalked regally across the road in front of us looking neither left nor right, and a pair of lions feasting on a buffalo calf. Rather, the A-male fed,

while his inferior partner waited patiently, having been repulsed with a growl. This preserve is shared by a tribal people, the Malgadi, who raise buffalo, sell their milk to be made into ghee, and drive their herds into their acacia-brushwood fortified villages at sundown.



We abandoned plans to continue by train to Junagadh and trundled there by bus instead, and when we got there also gave up the idea of climbing 10,000 steps up to the Jain temple of Girnar hill. Instead we confounded a local taxi driver by asking for an excursion to a place westerners hardly ever visit. Dhoraji is a provincial town and the only reason we went there is that we have a friend called Dina Dhorajiwala and although she has never been there, as the Indians say, this is her “home place” and we wanted to tell her what it was like. We were surprised by some unusual architecture: ancient balconies screened with delicate stone fretwork overlooked the market square and nearby lanes. No one seemed to have heard of the Dhoraji palace, but we

found it at the end of the main street. It is a fine, crumbling building in a high-walled courtyard and now houses the Department of Town Planning. The door was locked, not surprisingly, as there is little evidence in the jumbled streets of Dhoraji that this department does anything at all.

Our stuttering progress northwards by bus next took us to Gondal, where we stayed at Fawltly Palace. The last heir of the line of Maharajas who owns it calls it Gondal Palace. When the autorickshaw driver eventually found it behind gates in a small orchard we were informed by the solicitous young manager, Durgas, that because a member of the Greek Royal Family was staying here, with an entourage of 14, we would be taken to the Maharaja’s other palace, the Riverside. Our disgruntlement was mollified when we saw that it lived up to our palatial criteria and we had it all to ourselves. We were to have lunch there, but suddenly a car was sent to inform us that lunch would be served back at the Gondal Palace, and the car would return for us. Only it didn’t. So we went over by autorickshaw. After lunch, we were instructed that because of electricity problems we would have to move back to the Gondal Palace after all. I was delighted by the prospect of decanting the Greek royal family, but sadly this was not to be. We would stay in a third palace, the Maharajah’s personal home, just behind. The Maharajah himself was in London, as, we began to feel, perhaps we should be.

Durgas redeemed himself by taking us on a personal tour of yet another palace in the centre of town, which he unlocked to show us a museum of the

Maharajah's personal effects. Amongst the gold and silver caskets and the obligatory sovereign's fashion accessory of a balance to weigh him against tribute, were the revealing contents of the Maharajah's library. Next to a shelf occupied by the heavy volumes of the Gujarati-Hindi dictionary compiled by his grandfather was a comprehensive collection of early 20th Century adventure fiction for boys. Also a well-battered collection of ordinary toy cars. Which explained his addiction; the Maharajah had been a Formula One racing driver. We saw his competition car in his stables, as well as inspecting a collection of 50 classic road cars from the 1930s to the 1960s. For me it was a poignant hour: I saw three models similar to cars I had once owned - a 1936 Packard convertible roadster, a 1936 Ford phaeton (four-seater open car) and a 1964 Mercedes sports car.

Durgas dropped himself in it again, however, by delaying the transfer of our belongings, and after repeatedly promising to provide me with limes for my evening rum libation - the Palace, after all, was situated in a lime orchard - delivering tea instead. In the end, just before midnight we settled into our majestic suite in the third building we had been promised, tired and bemused, but still lime-less. I demanded a lime and Durgas sheepishly procured one. He redeemed himself yet again by getting up to drive us to the bus station at 6 am. Yet, although we had eaten three meals in the only dining room and sat about the veranda for some hours, we never saw any trace of the entourage of the Greek royal family.

Enroute to Bhuj the conductor took a fancy to me. He stowed our luggage, offered me his blanket and tapped me on the shoulder at frequent intervals to point out the names of all the bus stations we passed and to generally explain procedures in Gujarati assisted by sign language. By the end of the seven hour journey I could have passed a practical test for assistant bus conductor on the Gujarat state system. Fortunately by the time we arrived our friend had forgotten his insistent dinner invitations.

The next day we were picked up - eventually - by Dr Jhala, the leader of the "Conservation of the Indian Wolf" project and met our fellow Earthwatchers - an elderly American couple - both research scientists - and a couple of naive American girls. One was an environmental biologist and the other a recent Skidmore College graduate who asked whether Japan wasn't once part of the British Empire, but compensated by being jolly and resilient. We drove in jeeps to Tera, a small village in the desert. Accommodation was in a Jain guest house adjacent to a temple, which was decent and provided constant hot water and constant veg thalis for lunch. These were ladled onto our metal plates and cups in a dining room with a wire mesh fence. In this and many other respects, it was like being in prison. Not only the rum but also the limes had to be secreted as the Jains do not take any nourishment after nightfall lest they accidentally swallow a fly. The project staff were friendly, but Dr Jhala, though doubtless an able naturalist and a good chap to knock up a funding proposal with, is a playboy. His wife's family own the local palace and he keeps a couple of riding horses in the project's compound for diversion.

As a “wolf” project, the undertaking was a con. We spent most of our time chasing about after hyenas and jackals; the only wolves we saw were at a distance, by chance. And it was shambolic. International funding has provided state-of-the-art telemetric equipment. Wolves and hyenas have been captured and fitted with collars which emit radio signals for tracking. A sophisticated receiver can also download information which reveals the animal’s activity level over the past 36 hours. And the collars are interactive. They contain darts and at the press of a button the animal can be tranquillised by remote control. Jhala did this one evening to recover a female hyena from which he took blood samples and squeezed out milk from the teats. (It was tasteless, he said, and I took his word for it.)

On the other hand, the team had no basic tools, such as spades, trowels, brushes or sharpened sticks. We spent many hours clearing three-metre circles in the desert, covering them with fine sand and placing a stick anointed with a foul-smelling concoction in the centre - the object of the exercise being to attract jackals. We had to use our hands and whatever rocks and branches that were lying around. The idea was to estimate the jackal population by counting the number of tracks in the circle the next day. Almost invariably, as we bumped away in our jeep, we would pass a herd of buffaloes or goats aiming for our carefully prepared track plot. Some of our work survived, and on one glorious occasion 365 jackal tracks were counted. But whether that represented a sudden plague of jackals or one very excited animal, no one could say.

We enjoyed the experience - even the two sleepless nights huddled on a cold and windy outcrop listening to jackals howling in the dark and drawing reluctantly away from the campfire every 15 minutes to do the telemetry tracking. But it was never, I thought, serious research, only a cynical exercise in futility to deceive us that we were making some kind of useful personal contribution. One night we bumped twenty kilometres into the desert and then bumped right back again because the battery in the radio receiver was flat. Another night the staff forgot to bring torches and had to borrow our feeble light. As we watched the dust cloud of the receding jeep on another occasion we realised our telemetry receiver was inoperable, and the walkie-talkie to communicate with the group on the distant hill had not been supplied. The project staff loved to play with their impressive Global Positioning Satellite equipment, which can tell you where you are on the face of the earth within five metres. Yet the deputy leader had never heard of the difference between magnetic north and true north - which can introduce a variation of hundreds of miles. Of the six paying customers in our group, four were scientifically trained. They were appalled by the disorganisation but thought that the project itself had merit. This non-scientist thought it could best be described by one of our more successful exercises: collecting scat in plastic bags.

14: Leaving India for Thailand



We slipped out of India like silk through a keyhole. The taxi fetched us from the Yatri Guest House in Delhi at 7 p.m. The plane left at 10 p.m. and landed on time in Bangkok. Three hours later we flew up to Chiang Rai in northern Thailand, took a taxi to the station where a bus to Chiang Saen was waiting, hopped onto an autorickshaw to the river bank, hired a “fast boat” - a kind of pirogue with a bloody great car engine in the stern - and raced forty kilometres down the Mekong River into the rising sun blowing our jet-lagged minds in the roar and the breeze to Chiang Khong, an entry point for Laos. Despite a one and one-half hour time difference working against us, we arrived at a riverside shack in time for lunch.

We were culture-shocked. The towns of northern Thailand are modern, clean, and green. They are calm and they are quiet. The roads seem empty. There is no blare of traffic horns, no crush of crowds. We could be in Florida with funny writing. Suddenly we felt we were on holiday. India had been a struggle, more than we had realised.

As ever, our last few days in India had swung between the ridiculous and the sublime. A rattling seven hour bus journey conveyed us from Bhuj to Palanpur in eastern Gujerat. These epic trials of discomfort have become quite

bearable, perhaps because a 6 am start means the journey is half over before one is fully awake. At the Balaram Palace Resort the driver of the autorickshaw which had taken us the 18 kilometres to reach it would not dare venture up the grand drive until I had secured the permission of the guard in the gatehouse. Built as a hunting lodge in 1930 by the last in the line of the Lohani Nawab dynasty, this ornate building was a ruin by 1996, when it was restored in landscaped gardens overlooking a wildlife preserve - and a rural slum where families live under plastic sheets.

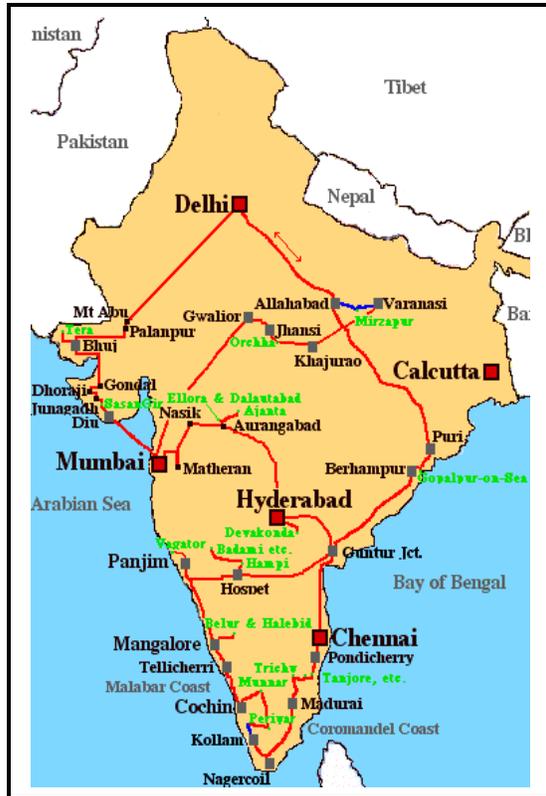
We must have been the first guests to depart by bus because the hotel staff thought a service passed by every fifteen minutes on the main road. They provided a jeep to take us to the local village bus stop. Fortunately the driver insisted on waiting while we chatted with the locals in sign language for half an hour. When the correct bus hove into view our new chums rushed in a body to flag it down. It slowed but refused to stop. There was nothing for it but to return to Palanpur where the bus to Mount Abu originates. I gave our driver a large tip, but again he insisted on waiting with us. Fortunately. Because we discovered the next bus would not leave for some hours. Our intrepid driver nipped over to the railway station to enquire about trains. Five minutes later he roared back, and with the greatest haste with which I have ever seen an Indian move, tumbled us and our luggage back into the jeep. The train was in the station and Judith was boarding it while I was still in the queue at the ticket window. The driver plucked me out of the line and propelled me to another open window. I bought my ticket, stuffed a wad of rupees into his hand, and jumped on the train. No seats, of course, but a friendly family let us perch on the edge of theirs for the hour's journey to Abu Road.

It was significantly cooler in Mount Abu, which sits on a plateau 700 metres above the Rajasthan plains. It's an old hill station, now a honeymooners' destination, and we stayed at the Edwardian-era Bikaner Palace, formerly a summer bolthole for the Maharajah of Bikaner. It was virtually empty, and the clerk upgraded us to a spacious suite with a private walled garden. Tea was served on the terrace overlooking the disused tennis court in gold-rimmed bone china cups, and dinner was taken in a gloomy faux-Adams dining room hung with large monochrome photographs of the Maharajah's other palaces, and snaps of himself with dead tigers and leopards. I was inspired to order a challenging Jungli Manus, chunks of lamb with lashings of pepper and chillies, which was the trail fodder for jungle hunting forays. Upon retiring there was a knock on the door and a servant entered with a welcome hot water bottle in each hand.

The next day we strolled down the road to what are reputedly the most magnificent Jain temples in India. Unlike Hindu temples, the decoration is all on the inside, and these marble filigree interiors with their dizzying profusion of images, including ducks and geese as well as the obligatory elephants, are astonishing in the fine detail of their carving. Our final Indian train journey was on the overnight Rajdhani Express to Delhi, and our two-tier second-class sleeper, surprisingly supplied with free bedding and bottled water, was extremely civilised, particularly since it was less than half full. Which is why I

suffered no remorse in evicting an elderly bilateral amputee who was squatting in our reserved compartment.

There are several mysteries about India which we have failed to resolve:



DIRT. Why is it so abominably filthy? There is no public space which is not heaped with refuse, ordure and disorder. Water reservoirs are covered with scum and used as rubbish dumps. Sacred temples are no exception: tanks, wells, courtyards and terraces are carpeted with discarded litter. Trees are festooned with blue plastic bags. It is an infectious habit, of course. After a few days in India we were casually tossing used plastic cups, paper plates and napkins out of train windows, too; there was, after all, no alternative but the floor. Only once did we observe anyone making any fuss about litter - in Tamil Nadu a priest reprimanded a middle-class Indian lady for discarding the paper and plastic remains of her lunch on the steps of a temple Nandi.

Yet personal hygiene seems to be of a high order: people bathing, laundering and brushing their teeth are part of the

landscape all over India. Troops of well-scrubbed children emerge from hovels glistening in neat school uniforms. And the few humble homes we entered have been clean and decent. Indians have told us that they don't see the rubbish in the streets - like the worn spot on the carpet which only visitors notice. It may be that most Indians are not many generations removed from a village mentality. In villages free-roaming animals fill the lanes with their droppings, and while people sweep and wash down the road in front of their own home or shop, rubbish accumulates in every corner. There is no communal pride. The attitude seems to be that it is someone else's job to clear it up. We saw this principle at work in Tera, in Kutch. A donkey had its leg broken in a collision with a vehicle. It stood about in the main market for a couple of days with an open wound showing bone. Eventually the beast fell over and while it was still able to raise its head, crows and dogs came to gnaw at the raw leg. It expired around mid-day, and people continued to pass it by without a glance. Only that night was the carrion removed, by a pair of men from a caste whose traditional role it was, apparently, to remove dead donkeys. They could make something out of its skin. But there is no caste, apparently, which finds it worthwhile to pick up expired plastic.

DESUETUDE. Why is it that everything in India begins to look as though it is falling apart even before it is finished - whether it's a new bridge or the tiles in the posh marble bathroom? There are some fine new structures, but no one seems to bother about maintenance.

BEGGARS. These come in three varieties: the "school pen" brigade of small children of all classes who demand pens, chocolate, your foreign coins "for their collection", or simply rupees; the snotty-nosed bright-eyed urchins and their mothers who live rough and pluck at your elbow, and the disabled: the blind or hideously deformed cripples. The first two categories are a constant minor irritant, the last cannot be ignored without a flush of guilt. Indians give only to this group. We stepped over paraplegics lying in gutters, walked past hydrocephalic babies lolling in their mothers' arms, and flinched at a youth with the left half of his face dissolving like a rubber mask laid on a hot plate who passed down a railway carriage handing out roughly printed cards: he needed money for further operations, his father had a terminal wasting disease and his sister was unable to find a husband. We refused all of these fellow men and women. Judith's rationale is that she contributes to charities regularly in other ways. Mine is less virtuous. No-one's pockets are deep enough to cure India of its human misfortunes; there must be better ways for society to provide social support than to tolerate begging. What would you have done?

RELIGIOUS HYSTERIA. Any attempt to govern India is paralysed by religious protests. Not just the major issues like the Ayodhya temple, which fervent believers may genuinely feel strongly about, but religious humbug too. For example, no local, provincial or state government is able to resist a group that wants to build a temple, for some holy reason, on a particular site - even if that land is publicly owned and protected by legislation. So a shoddy temple is thrown up, and after a while the devout group melts away and the temple is replaced by a block of flats, or whatever. It's a more buccaneering version of the tactic property developers use in England, where a farmer's field is first used as a venue for car boot sales to prepare the ground for a change to commercial use.

India is priest-ridden, both by establishment ecclesiastics and the self-ordained, and all religions enforce tradition and resist change. Can one ever expect effective government in a country where even official events cannot be scheduled without consulting an astrologer?

AND YET . . . India is at the forefront of the Information Technology revolution. Western values are sweeping across the country through film and television. There are one billion Indians and most of them work very hard, expect very little, and are smart and enterprising. If they ever get their act together . . . My epiphany vision of India happened in Tamil Nadu. A beautiful young girl boarded the rattle-trap bus. She was immaculate. She wore a stunning, colourful sari and her long black plaits were pinned together with fresh flowers. She stood in the crowded aisle for 45 minutes studying her lecture notes before getting off the bus at the regional college of electrical engineering

ON A FINAL, LIGHTER NOTE: here is a brief collection of some delightful “Indian English” constructions seen on public notice.

Sharp Traders.
(A firm selling building materials in Hyderabad).

Watermillion salad.
(On a menu in Hampi).

Genius School admission are open.
(An advertising sign in Hyderabad).

Off the N17 near Panjim there is a road sign pointing to the “Journalist Colony”.

Running Room
(Sign on railway administration building near Hubli).

Specious Car Park.
(On a sign advertising a hotel in Hospet).

Room for Rant.
(In Hampi).

Our Lady of Mirages Urban Co-op and Savings Institution.
(A sign near Agassaim, Goa).

Shammy Arts - Handicrafts and Curios.
(A shop in Matancherry, Cochin).

Notice to Ladies: Ladies who are having their monthly course are not admitted.
Or there will be suffering.
(Sign outside the Jain Temples in Mount Abu).

And this exemplary flourish of corporate transparency: at a level crossing in Hospet, on the side of the signal box are painted the names of the signalmen, the dates of their eye tests, and the results.

Finally, if you have any complaints about these reports you might try applying to the “Information cum Public Grievance Counter” at the railway station in Ernakulum.