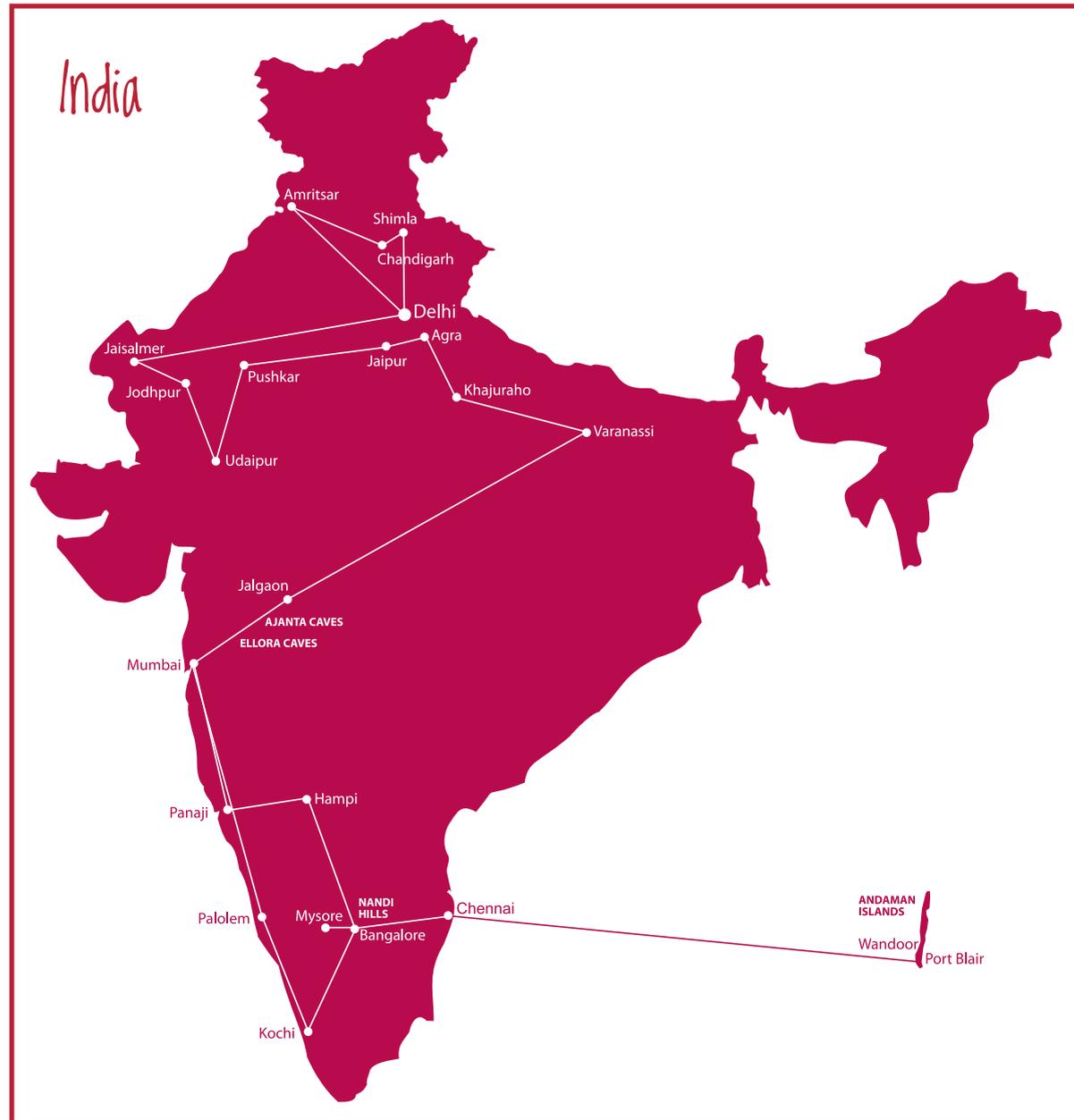


THE OLDEST BACKPACKERS IN TOWN

RAJ TO RICHES

Gill Vine





THE OLDEST BACKPACKERS IN TOWN SERIES

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RAJ TO RICHES

Jaisalmer Fort

21 October 2013: UK

The shape of things to come

Obtaining Indian visas...our first encounter with Indian bureaucracy. Not quite as stressful as it might have been but allow at least 24 hours to complete the online application form, making sure you have lots of family history details including the date and place of birth of your parents.

Registering for an online account to buy Indian rail tickets...our second encounter with Indian bureaucracy. Far more stressful. Here goes – first select tickets, choosing from seven different trains with eight different classes including first air-con (1AC), second air-con (2AC), third air-con (3AC), first class non air-con (FC), ordinary sleeper (SL), executive air-con chair (EC), air-con chair (CC), second class chair (2C). Although not all classes are available on all trains. We select our train and class. Now we must choose which quota from a list of seven...Ian is eligible to choose from three: general, tourist or emergency (called Taktal and at supplementary cost). I am eligible to choose from all of the above plus women's quota. The train is full, there are no tickets on any train, in any class, in any of the quotas...but we can go on a waiting list.

There are also two waiting lists. From what we can gather, one is a pseudo list in which tickets are already cancelled...so you are going to be allocated a cancelled ticket...so it's not *really* a waiting list then? The general waiting list is real. So how likely are we to get a ticket if we are on the general list? We have to do a mathematical calculation. Example: we are number 40 on the list, but the pseudo list has 10 names on it so 40 minus 10 means we are actually 30th on the list because 10 have already been cancelled? Well we *think* that's how it works. OK we will try a different quota. Can we go back one page to amend the quota? No, we have to start the whole search again from scratch. A time consuming process, but not too difficult once you get your head around it. OK that's the easy bit!

Now we have to register for an online account. All is going swimmingly until the stage where we need to obtain two passwords from Indian Railways – an email (OTP) password and a mobile (OTP) password. Email is fine but we don't have an Indian mobile number. No problem, we can email over a scan of passport and visa. We follow the instructions



Flight to India

to the letter, obtain our passwords and fill in the form. Back comes an email telling us our registration has been successful. Bingo. We enter our passwords: error message, 'your password is incorrect'. Two days and fifteen failed passwords later we concede defeat. We will have to wait till we arrive as we are clearly not going to be able to complete our online reservations. Our understanding is that it is possible to travel without a reservation but it means sitting on a hard wooden bench. Is this the shape of things to come? Yep, I think it may be!

22 October 2013: New Delhi

Here we go again

We are due to depart from Heathrow on an overnight flight. We arrive in good time and head to bag drop where we are told the flight is full. We are offered generous incentives (including hotel and free flights for another trip) if we will fly tomorrow instead, but Ian refuses to sacrifice his seat – maybe he's afraid I will make him return to India next year? We board the plane and set off half an hour late, yet still arrive on schedule.

Thankfully our driver is waiting at the airport exactly where we expected him to be and we are whisked off to our hotel. We are located in a busy part of the city as we like to be close to the sights and the train station for onward travel. As a result, I have requested a quiet room. It is not quite as shiny as it looked on the website but it's clean and a decent size. We open the curtains to look at the view through our window and see a brick wall six inches away. It does make you wonder why they bothered...perhaps a mural might have been a better use of effort? Oh well, at least it's quiet!

We set off in search of cash and the railway station to buy train tickets for Amritsar and Shimla. Locating an ATM proves difficult. Then locating an ATM that will give us some money is even more difficult. The first one won't serve foreigners, the second has run out of money. Time to cool off. We climb a steep stairway to a rooftop cafe where we sip our drinks and watch the world go by. When we return the ATM is fully functioning again.

Next it's off to buy the train tickets. This is a surprisingly relaxing experience. We head up to the Foreign Tourist Office which is cool with its many fans soothing the frenzied clientele. We take a numbered ticket (think supermarket deli counter) and wait our turn sitting on a comfy sofa under a fan. There are 22 people ahead of us but the numbers are rattling through surprisingly fast. Ian notices that everyone else is going to the counter with completed sheets of paper. Ian locates the offending forms.

We have five tickets each to book which requires five separate forms with dates, passenger names, passport numbers, train times, train names, train numbers, and in some cases meal options. We just about complete the paperwork as our number pops up. Reservations are made so we are now



On the streets of New Delhi

7 November 2013: New Delhi

Dash across Delhi

This morning we pack our bags as we are leaving Delhi later this afternoon. We check out of our room and go for lunch. Yesterday we spotted two street guys scratching through rubbish for plastic bottles for recycling and anything else they could find. I have decided that they are to have our fleeces if they are still around today. We make our way down the alley to the place where they were last seen and sure enough, there they are beavering in the garbage. Do you need this, I say, offering Ian's fleece? The man stretches out and takes the fleece his eyes alight with joy. The other man looks crestfallen. I reaches inside my bag for my own fleece and man number two is now beaming. We also give them a pair of thick walking socks each. It's a humbling experience and we are glad they are happy yet sad that life is like this...but this is India, good and bad.

We return to our hotel to make use of the facilities, recharge the mobile and collect our bags. Our train departs at 5.30pm so we leave in good time at 4.15pm. The train station is only a five minute tuk-tuk ride away but





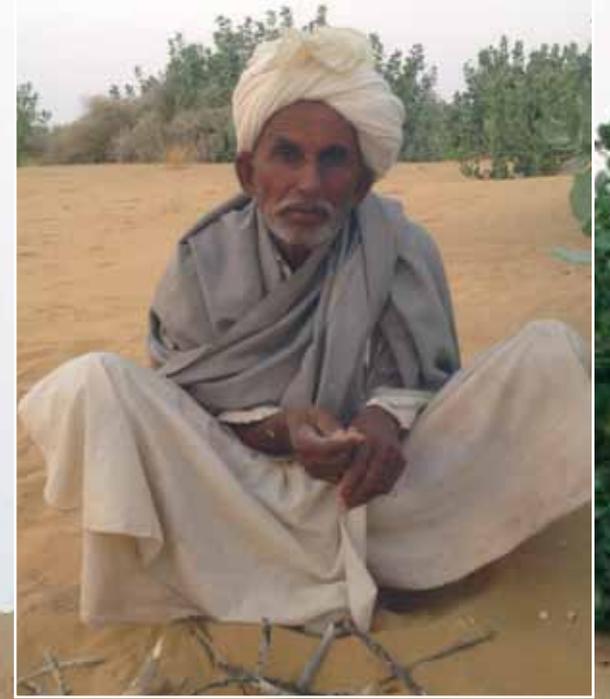
Silhouette in the sand



Tiny footprints in the sand



Father and son at nomad BBQ



15 November 2013: Udaipur

Jeux sans frontières?

Krishna, Hari Krishna...I could throttle those people, they have been at it all night. For once we are pleased it is 7am and time to leave this noisy place. Our taxi arrives at 7.15am on the dot and speeds us to Ajmer Junction by 7.45am. We just knew it would only take 30 minutes to get here but our hotel insisted we would need to leave very early because of the traffic...what traffic? Never mind, this leaves us an hour to purchase our last two train tickets for January. Ian guards our luggage and I join the queue as I am better able to deal with queue jumpers than Ian, plus women get priority! Even so a couple of young men try to get ahead of me...sign language of pointing first at them and then at the back of the queue seems to do the trick.

I reach the ticket counter and pass through our completed forms and passports. No, this is the general ticket counter, I must go to counter 9, located in the 'backside'. I'd like to say it's a pain in the backside but off I go. I find an office but it is deserted, except for a huge brown rat the size of a large hamster – it scuttles away as I enter. Ughh – I scuttle away at twice the speed.

I walk a little further down the platform and see two more ticket counters. Sure enough, window 9 is labelled 'foreign tourists' along with a number of other categories who may buy tickets at this window. These include: senior citizens, the disabled and civil servants...interesting grouping. I am third in the queue...the old man at the front is taking forever. Finally it is sorted out, by which time the person in front of me has given up and gone away so I am next. I thrust my paperwork through the window before anyone else can push in. The man cannot read Ian's writing...what train number, what time? I rack my brains to remember desperately hoping I won't have to lose my place in the queue to obtain the details. I take a guess at the train number and miraculously it's the right one. Our first train has no 2AC berths available (bookings have been open five days now and trains fill up fast) so we must take 3AC instead...never mind, it was OK last time, just a bit less headroom. The other train we want to book is two months ahead and only released its tickets this morning so I am able to secure 1AC. Perfect!

It's now 8.30am. Ian has checked the station timetable and our train is running ten minutes early, we are amazed – do trains ever run early? We need to get to platform 5. We are in luck as there is an escalator here. We make our way across the bridge and stand on the filthiest platform ever. There is a cow wandering along, busy leaving steaming dollops all over the place, and litter is strewn everywhere. At the side of the platform a young boy is peeing on the tracks. No wonder they have rats here...Ian tells me that he has seen one too.

City Palace: decorative ceiling detail

There are quite a few beggars on the platform and we are sitting ducks. I reach in my bag for some food to give to a lady who is indicating that she is hungry and wants food. The food is taken and disappears under her cloak. Instead of going away her hand is outstretched in our direction again, now she wants money. And, of course, now there are quite a few others coming our way. OK, that's enough, no more. It kills me to say no to two little kids but give to one and another twenty appear. I quietly fish out some cash and keep it in my hand intending to give it to the kids just as I board the train, but now the train is entering the station and the kids have gone away to hassle some other tourists further up the platform.

Our train has chugged in fifteen minutes ahead of schedule and suddenly there is commotion as everyone tries to locate their correct carriage. We are in chair class, carriage C1, which should be near the front. The CC carriages roll past but we only see D1-4. No sign of C at all. Ian checks the manifesto and finds our names – looks like it's carriage D1 then! It's a joint effort to haul our bags up top...the train is full and there is very little space on the luggage racks. We just about manage to squeeze it all in. All sorted. We settle down for our five hour journey to Udaipur.

The time passes surprisingly quickly. One thing about these trains, they have all been surprisingly comfortable. I am sitting across the aisle from a French Canadian and we have an interesting conversation until my voice caves in and I start a coughing fit. I must say that the dubious looking bright green potion purchased from the chemist has been working well – much better than any cough medicine I have ever purchased in the UK. That said, it probably contains ingredients banned in our country!

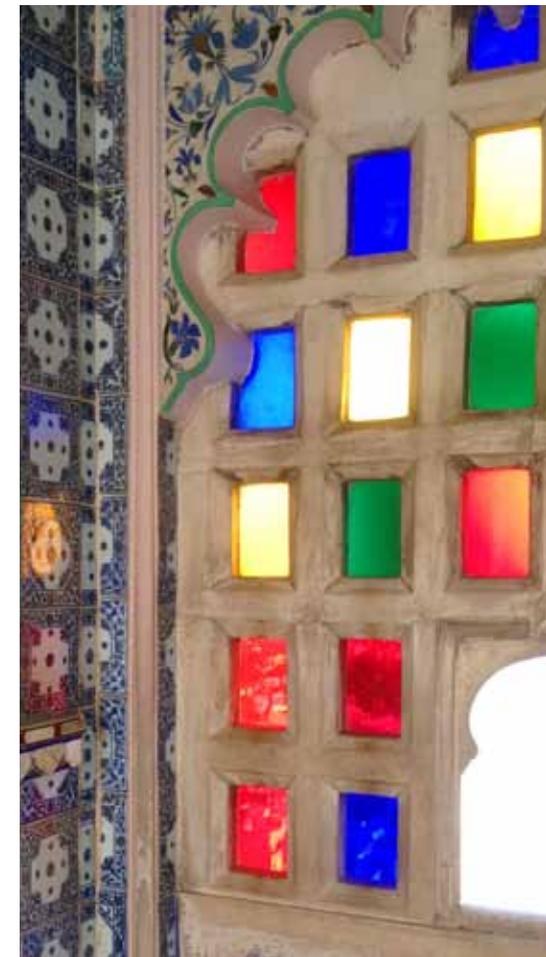
We arrive in Udaipur at 1.45pm. The rickshaw man wants Rs200, twice the normal fare. He says it is because the road is closed 'for the festival'. We seem to have heard this story about closed roads a few times before so I am sceptical and haggle. We meet in the middle at Rs150. We speed through the town until we come up against a barrier. Rickshaw man tries to squeeze through the middle but the soldiers are having none of it. I think he tries to plead the case of 'foreign tourists on board', which has worked in the past but not today. We are turned back. Now we must go by the back roads. Another Rs100, he pleads. I think he's having us on as he originally asked Rs200 but he is pleading and for the sake of 50p we can't be bothered to argue. OK, OK, I say with a pronounced sigh... rickshaw man grins from ear to ear.

Now rickshaw man is driving us up some very narrow streets, clearly not designed for motor vehicles. We meet some motorbikes coming the other way and at first it looks like it's going to be guns at dawn as no-one is prepared to give way. Eventually the motorbikes back up. Now we are passing a parked rickshaw with another rickshaw man taking a nap inside. Our rickshaw man stops saying, just one minute...he jumps out and runs back to sleeping rickshaw man who is rudely shaken awake. Loud exchange and sleepy rickshaw man looks sheepish. We can only guess that we have the rickshaw boss and one of his staff has literally been caught napping!



Ganesh (Hindu elephant God, son of Lord Shiva)

City Palace: coloured glass and tiles





Train journey to Kharjaraho

detail, hoping to find some error no doubt, but then he hands it back. Does he want my passport too? No!

The rest of our journey passes without incident. Ian and I now have a complete eight bedded section of the carriage to ourselves so I stretch out and read my book. The train manages to catch up a little on lost time, but not a lot. We arrive in Mahoba station (now running 90 minutes late) so we anticipate our arrival at Kharjarho will be around 9pm. Imagine our surprise when, at 7.25pm, our carriage boy comes to inform us we have arrived at Kharjarho. What? How have they managed to make up 90 minutes in the space of one station? OK the train was really rattling along...I just hope they weren't 'cutting corners'!

It's a nice surprise to be met at the railway station by our hotel owner. He shows us his card and our name to prove his authenticity – it says 'MR GILLIAN' (close). Our rickshaw will cost Rs150. Not bad given the distance and very nice not to have to haggle after such a long journey. Back at the hotel we are pleasantly surprised by our room. All spotlessly clean albeit basic. Our sightseeing programme for tomorrow is finalised and we are up in the rooftop restaurant by 9pm enjoying some delicious potato curry. And now to bed...tomorrow will be another early start if we want to escape the main heat of the day.

26 November 2013: Kharjaraho

No sex please...we're British!

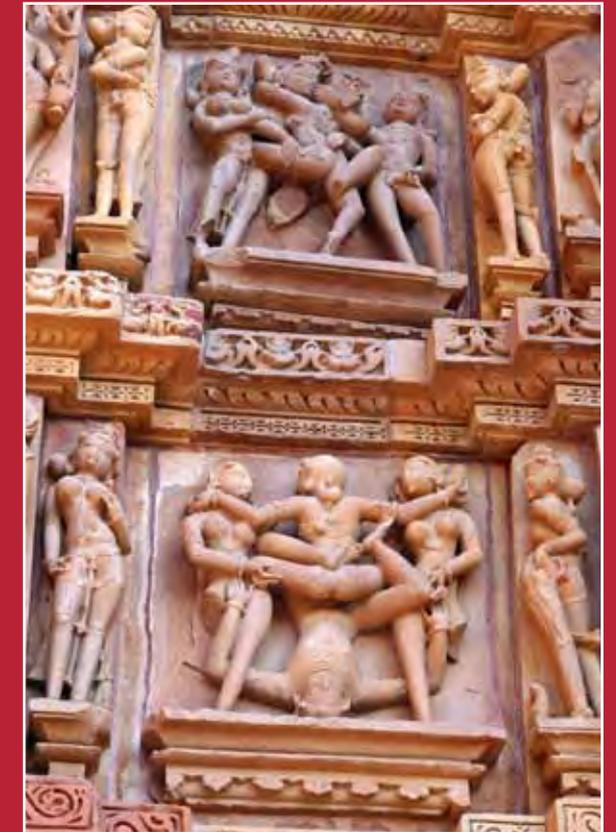
Temple at Kharjaraho



This morning we are due to visit the temples of Kharjaraho, famed for their abundance of erotic art forms. Apparently around 85 of these temples were built here by the Chandelas between 950 and 1050AD. Twenty five now remain, their isolation assisting in their preservation.

The temples were re-discovered in 1838 by a Victorian explorer and are excellent examples of Indo-Aryan architecture...but it is the embellished erotic carvings that have made them famous. Whilst many of the carvings contain interesting imagery, a large percentage depict either everyday life or the Chandelas at war. Posturing heavenly nymphs, dancing girls and mortal men all feature in 3D carvings. The stone pairs, threesomes and complete group orgies dispaly, not only the skill of the sculptors, but the dexterity and flexibility of the Chandelas.

The guidebook lists where to see the best naughty bits. One section displays a nine person multi-positional orgy, followed by a section containing a man being very friendly with his horse, much to the horror of an on looking woman. On the dancing platform, there are girls clad in wet saris. At the next temple the feasibility of the handstand position is illustrated – apparently several female helpers are required in addition to



Kharjaraho details

3 December 2013: Mumbai

Westward ho!

Today we travel west, well south west to be exact. It's the same train number that brought us here from Varanasi...that is the one which was over five hours late. Last night our hotel owner called the enquiry line to find out what time the train left and has been told it's running two hours late. But you can't always trust them, he tells me, so best to go to the station without your luggage in the morning to check. The station is just a five minute walk from our hotel.

Our train is scheduled to arrive at 6.38am so we are ready by 6.15am and pick our way up the street in the dark. There seems to be no-one to ask so we make our way over to the platform. Here an illuminated sign informs us that our train will arrive at 8.18am. We return to the hotel where a scheduled power cut has been enforced during our absence. Our room is now

like a sauna so we sit in reception which is cooler. Our manager suggests we leave at 7am, this time with our luggage.

At the railway station we manage to find a seat but as the sun starts to rise it's getting pretty hot. Several trains pull in and out and we spot a chance to shift to a seat in the shade. I sprint over to 'bag the place' and Ian shifts the luggage. Never mind, only half an hour now. The illuminated sign is still flicking over listing all the scheduled trains with times and platform numbers in alternating Hindi and English. Hang on a minute...is it my eyesight or does that now say 10.20am beside our train number? Ian heads off to investigate and sure enough, just when we thought the end was in sight, our train is now a further two hours late! How did a train become an extra two hours late in the space of five minutes?

Whilst we wait, a group of school children gather around us. It starts off with one brave youngster and grows steadily as the others find out that we don't bite. They want to practice their English, most especially

with Ian. What is his name? How old is he? Where does he come from? Where is he going? Mumbai, Ian answers the final question. Ah, Mumbai, three and three quarters. I hope they are not saying what I think they are saying? That our train will be another three and three quarter hours? Or worse still that it's not expected till 3.45pm? A young man sitting on the bench next to me is going to Mumbai on the same train. It will be 10.30am, he declares confidently. We wait.

By 10.30am there is still no sign of our train and it has disappeared off the information board listing altogether. Passenger and cargo trains come and go...and to cut a long story short, our train finally rolls in at 11.45am... five hours late. Well I suppose they are, at least, consistent. Needless to say, Ian and I are now getting a bit hacked off with the Indian train system.

We board our train and complete the usual obstacle course of shoes and kids to reach our berth. We're glad to see it hasn't been double booked. We collect clean sheets from the carriage boy and once beds are made up, I climb up to my bunk for some shut-eye.

And now we have a jolly ticket inspector checking we are in the right place and seeming to want a nice chat. Where are we from? England. How do we like India? Very much (probably best to be diplomatic). Are we here for tourism? Yes. How do we like Indian Railways? Well, what can we say? Your railways are very nice I say...BUT...this train is VERY late! Loud laughter from the Indians all around me. FIVE hours late...and also FIVE hours late three days ago. Indians are now in hysterics and Ian is trying to hide under his bed sheets. Well madam that is true, says our man smilingly. But you see, this line is very old and built by the British. Oh, so it's our fault it's late then? Exactly madam, exactly. More mirth from our Indian friends.

The rest of our journey is slow, slow, slow. We have lost another hour by the time we reach the next station. We just hope that our hotel will not have locked up and gone to bed by the time we reach our destination!

Finally we arrive in Mumbai at 7.30pm, hot and weary. It's very sticky here. We find the pre-paid taxi booth and it's a hassle free ride to our hotel. The





Dolphins!

8 December 2013: Panaji

Splash!

Today we are scuba diving. We are up early, collect our packed breakfast and set off to Siquerim Jetty to meet our boat. Apparently the water is 28° C with a disappointing 5m viz...oh dear, I think we'll manage! On the way to the jetty the driver asks us for the phone number of the dive centre...guess what, he does not know the way. Fortunately I have the number and directions are given but it doesn't exactly fill us with confidence. We reach a jetty of sorts and unload. You are sure this is the right place, I ask...the boats don't exactly look like dive boats, more like overgrown canoes. He makes enquiries. Now we must get back in the car. It turns out that the jetty is 50m further on...we could walk but he insists on driving us there all the same. The boats here are the same.

We see a boat being loaded with dive cylinders. On the dot of 8.30pm a car draws up and four guys get out. We show our dive certs and log books and are told to wait. Do they want help loading the boat? No, we are on holiday, they will do it. They are also waiting for more clients. The 'more clients' turns out to be one try diver and his girlfriend who is going snorkelling (although when it comes to it she is too scared, so doesn't).

We pick our way to the water's edge, take off our sandals and paddle to the boat. It looks like a traditional long canoe with plastic seats. Apparently they do have a 'real diveboat' but it's in for repair...just our luck. It's interesting to note the religious slogans painted on the



Boxfish (Photo courtesy Angshuman, Barracuda Diving)

boats, 'in God we trust', 'Jesus never fails', 'walk with the Lord'...and each one painted with a cross. Should we say a prayer before we step on board, we wonder?

All set to go, we are introduced to the five crew members...the guy that is driving the boat, two instructors, one for us and one for the try diver along with two wannabe dive masters. The boat 'speeds' away from the mainland and we hear whoops from the crew as they point out pods of dolphins surfacing then ducking and diving through the waves. There are loads of them but all too fast for my camera so you'll just have to take my word for it.

We arrive at the dive site, all our kit has been made up for us so all we have to do is check it out and kit up. Entry to the water is by backwards roll off the side. Not too bad once I've hoisted myself up on to the steep side with the help of my friendly divemaster in the making. Gosh it's a fair few years since I've done this...all this hard boat diving with lift attached is making me soft. Our Goan dive friends are astounded at the thought of a dive boat with a lift – I seriously believe they think we are joking. OK, first a weight check...I need another kilo and then we're off.

Nudibranch (Photo courtesy Angshuman, Barracuda Diving)



Siquerim Jetty



Dolphins at sea and diving religiously



Devaraja Market

New Statue Circle

31 December 2013: Mysore

Mysore here we come

According to our guidebook, if we haven't visited Mysore we haven't seen South India, so Mysore here we come! A nice easy start to our day with a hot shower (yes, hot water) and breakfast of cornflakes with cold milk washed down with watermelon juice. Very nice. We pack a small bag and leave the rest of our luggage in storage setting off for the 11am train.

Our train journey is only two hours and our carriage is practically empty. Being New Year's Eve, I expected it to be packed. We are on one of those trains where they serve food so we get a reasonable biryani and a desert of crumbly honeycomb with pistachio and almonds. It's not bad. We arrive at Mysore station on time at 1pm. Our hotel is supposedly a three minute drive...a slight exaggeration, but it's not far. We settle in and then set off to take a look at the old market nearby.

The *Devaraja Market* does not disappoint – it sells traditional items and is full of colour. Its wares range from multi-coloured piles of dye (kumkum) used for painting bindi spots on the forehead to baskets of fragrant flower garlands, neat piles of fruit and veg plus row upon row of ladies bangles. Unfortunately there are lots of pesky boys trying to drag us off to see their perfumed oil stalls. One youngster thrusts a book at me so that I can read what his English 'friend' has written about him. It reads: "beware of annoying boys dragging you off to see their oil stalls".

We are also being pursued by a guy who wants to sell me anklets with bells for Indian dancing. He is so persistent that he even follows us out of the market and across the street. We eventually shake him off and he goes

Memorial and Gandhi Statue



Colourful Devaraja Market



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