

## The Travel Journals by Jim Pike

Feb.21 1984.

I flew out of Sydney at 4.20pm on QF001 in business class thanks to an upgrade from Qantas. I should think so since I was writing and programming their in-flight audio comedy channel for an international pittance. They were constantly complaining about all the old British tracks such as Tony Hancock, The Goons and Round the Horne and wanted something more contemporary. “What about Eddie Murphy?” came one strange request from them, bearing in mind that ours was a captive, very mixed audience who would be locked in a long flying tube for up to 22 hours with nothing to do but compose abusive letters about the smutty/political/racist/ anti-whatever nature of the aforementioned comedy. By the time we edited all of the ‘fucks’ and attached jokes from Eddie it became a very bizarre performance from a man who seemed to have a speech impediment involving the words ‘mother’ and ‘hole’.

I was once taken to task for a track from the Australian Naked Vicar Show featuring a satirical and damning look at rape in war...handled in a much subtler way than it sounds. A professional complainer (by the list of government department heads she’d cc’d) missed the whole point of the piece and that entire month’s comedy channel had to be taken off every plane and the track replaced...probably with something old, safe and British. She no doubt returned victoriously home to her cardigan, her mother’s ashes and a cat ironically (but unknowingly) called Muffy. The moral of the story is if you don’t get the

point of comedy, its probably best if you think of it as drama for boring people.

I settled into my comfy chair next to a Dutchman named Van Ruth. His one very sincere belief was that every race who wasn't Dutch would be much better off under their colonial rule, his barber certainly would have been. What the Dutch don't know about style they make up for with that famous charm which has made Afrikaaners such sought after dinner guests. I had no idea how long he'd spent in Australia but he was magnanimous enough to say that he liked the movie Phar Lap...possibly the haircuts, but who can be sure. A long distance Dutchman can make a snoring, drunken German look like the funniest, warmest experience this side of an Edam enema. While Dutch women have wonderful skin, the men try to improve their personalities by quaffing beer that disappoints itself before the head even settles while envying the Belgians their reputation as rapacious libertines. He left the plane in Singapore to lay a little Western technology and dykes on the breathless yellow masses.

His place was taken by a small, poorly folded Englishman. He slept most of the way, making goldfish motions with his lips and woke only for meals which he cut with strange twitching movements and flicked into his mouth as if he was flying fishing for tonsils. He would raise his coffee cup carefully to cat's-bum lips and throw it down his throat with fear and surprise. Perhaps he was raised by gypsies and fed in a moving caravan. Wisely he ignored the season's James Bond movie, Never say Nothing to Nobody. He looked out the window at the bleak,

pouring rain as we came onto Heathrow finals for a 7 am arrival. "Five degrees", said the Captain. "Cold" said the fly fisherman, the beginning and end of our informative conversation.

Now for the usual palaver of the rental car with Martin's & Co! Why ask you what vehicle you'd like when they patently not only don't have it but are aware that it was never, ever going to be built? I looked forward to a smart VW Jetta and was handed a red Renault Thingy. Never mind, this was a minor inconvenience compared to London traffic. My memory stood me in almost good stead and after only two laps of the Hyde Park roundabout I arrived at the London Embassy Hotel in Bayswater Road. Not much point, really. They didn't want to know me. Renovations were going on and the opportunity for tourist buggerisation pleased them no end. I'd have to toddle back into morning traffic, navigate my way to the other side of Hyde Park to their sister hotel and if they can be of any help at all it would be a big disappointment to them. As it turned out the other place was one of those pleasant three story Georgian terrace-like affairs down behind the Royal Albert Hall where they were equally pleased to tell me that I wasn't expected and my room would be ready when someone in a fez finished spilling things in it. I left my bag with the concierge who tossed it into a room marked "Good luck mate", grabbed my map and headed off to look at motorcycle shops. Terribly historical and artistically interesting ones I hasten to add lest you think galleries and museums were not on my list.

I prefer London in the rain to London at the height of summer, where it positively leaps to the defence

of the planet by allowing your sweat to soak up all those airborne diesel particles that won't stick to equestrian statues. London in the rain is Victorian England; Sherlock Holmes, Oliver Twist, mystery, romance and a sense of walking streets that were packed with a fully functioning civilisation long before Australian aboriginals were even remotely aware they remained undiscovered and overdue for a good dose of smog and pox. My first motorcycle shop was in the cute sounding suburb of Tooting Bec. Who Bec may have been and why she did railway impressions I never learned (actually a bec is a small stream and it was probably discovered by Wilberforce Capability Tooting while out hunting poor people.)

The shop was the highly respected Verrall's Motorcycles, which for many years has specialised in Veteran, Vintage and more recently Classic British motorcycles for gentlemen with dosh. The shopfront was late 1800's with two large bay windows peering into a beautiful wood and brass showroom with bare floorboards made even more lustrous by slow, constant droppings of British colonial oil. Mr. Brian Verrall was immaculately dressed and politeness personified. The sort of chummy chap from whom you would buy a bike just to please him. I perused models of immaculate Vincents, Velocettes, Sunbeams and Ariels that I had previously only seen in books. Since our dollar was almost on parity with the pound price was not an issue, but none of them screamed: "Take me down the pub Jim, get pissed and fall off me at speed," as they were sometimes wont to do. In any case I enjoyed a jolly good chat, an excellent cup of coffee and a free copy of Classic Bike magazine from a now departed

legend of the classic motorcycle scene. For years I had seen his impressive ads in the British mags and wasn't the slightest bit disappointed. So on to an ad from the next nearest shop, Honour Oak motorcycles at Forest Hill. This was not so much a case of chalk and cheese but something much browner and less chewy.

My own misguided entry into business in 1970, Motorcycle Services, wasn't grand but at least I swept it out each day and my spiders hadn't built webs so thick archaeologists came to measure the mummified sparrows. I don't remember the name of the face held together with hair and chip grease that came to the door. I could tell business wasn't booming as all the lights were turned off to create a gloom which would have made even Dickens apprehensive. A five pound note was bulldog-clipped to the counter in lieu of a cash register. Opening the door and loitering in the background were obviously chores that taxed him to the limit of his Marketing Degree and I spent several wistful minutes trying to work out whether ugly made you stupid or vice versa. Then I recalled the occupation of TV lifestyle presenter and discounted the theory immediately. I made no comments and bought nothing and he seemed just as pleased as if I'd pissed in a corner and drowned one of his rats. No one should have to live like that. God knows I tried.

That night I caught up with Dave Gibson, Gibbo to his friends, of which there were and are, many. How to describe Gibbo? He once put a doily on his head and did a fairly accurate impression of Queen Victoria for a very appreciative Jerry Lewis. A bit like that. He is an extremely creative, original and funny fellow and as with many of that

ilk goes through life like a man in a tin hat dancing in a lightning storm. We met while doing stand-up comedy and appreciated similar humour. His background was University revues and sketches where he could hide behind characters, but stand-up gives you no such advantage. He attacked the genre with wit, speed and enough energy to attract his own carbon tax; a whirlwind of creativity and intelligent routines that left audiences and himself gasping. He would become so nervous backstage before going on that he'd make himself physically sick and occasionally pass out, which we later realised was due to him being just a little bit madder than the rest of us. Later he would find his perfect niche in breakfast radio creating legendary characters for brekky jocks who would owe their fame and longevity to him, but now he was in London because he won a contest to perform at the Comedy Store in LA and is triumphantly returning to the antipodes his ears ringing to the peals of baffled laughter.

This was no mean feat. Australian stand up is still in an early phase where publicans, those unfaltering patrons of the arts, encourage comedians by threatening to sack the lot of them and put in a jazz band unless they're 20% funnier by Friday. Sydney and Melbourne are our only funny cities (sorry, intentionally funny) but they are cultures in collision. In Melbourne the comedian is welcomed by a town that understands the concept of cabaret and intelligent entertainment, whereas in Sydney underground bunkers are festooned with the surliness of those still upset by the banning of bear baiting. I believe the answer lies in an old jealousy from our fiscal history. Melbourne is old money, while Sydney is old credit. The

US, however, is the lion's den where careers can be kindled with a spark of brilliance. He tells me he killed them at one show and died at the other, making a very acceptable casualty rate of fifty percent. When you take into account how many in the audience would not have understood him because he was speaking English then it's even more culturally impressive.

He is also determinedly fearless when confronted with the social dilemmas of alcohol and so we find ourselves at the Glasgow Arms in London for a dozen calming pints and the idea of us travelling somewhere together. Strolling past a travel agent's Gibbo spotted a picture of the Lake Palace in Udaipur, India." Want to go to India?" he enquired. "Why not" was the consensus and we booked our tickets with no more forethought than pointing to the picture on the wall and demanding: "We want to stay there", wherever 'there' was. Not unlike pointing at a KFC menu and saying: "Give food". I wish our inspiration for the coming adventure was a more exciting and picturesque tale, but I'm a person who made the commitment to marriage on the toss of a coin so what can I say? Although technically I lie, because at this point Gibbo let slip that he'd been to India once before and mumbled: "I should be all right".

"All right about what?" I enquired and his mumbling went on, to embrace: "long time ago...at Uni...no big deal"...etc. I regarded this suddenly more interesting Gibbo with a new, albeit reluctant, respect. (A lot easier to do at this point in time since with aging and a rich diet his head has now come to resemble a peanut.) He is indeed a man of many talents, most of them requiring much maintenance and several of which I choose to remain

ignorant. I will say no more as he has refused to give me money to write in a steely gaze and chin so cleft it gives off an echo. Meanwhile back at the travel agent's we also booked two internal flights to take us from Delhi up to Amritsar which he highly recommends for its food, its scenery and its food.

Unseasoned London-wanderers that we are, we end up at a restaurant called Strikes, a place undoubtedly boasting several franchises at locations with names like Pusfield-on-Scum. We were served by that rarity, a British waiter, and this one appeared to have meat in his back pockets which he tenderized as he walked.

Feb 22.

The British have a quaint belief relating to fire safety in the refurbished rabbit warren hotels of London. Firstly they fill these hotels with as many rooms as possible and narrow the corridors so that only wasp-waisted, tiny imported types need apply as maids. Americans immediately notice this design feature upon becoming jammed as they leave the lift. Along these narrow passageways at intervals of approximately five metres the OH&S conscious hoteliers install 'safety' doors made of scientifically thin wood and thoughtful glass panels. These allow you to watch any fire rushing towards you, having devoured the last fifteen 'safety' doors in 20 seconds flat. In places like these I always read the Fire Escape Safety Card behind my door and locate my nearest exit. Call me paranoid but I have no intention of being trapped behind an



Arkansas truck salesman as his arse cheek fat adds to the conflagration. I once read about a gang in Manilla that would set small fires in hotels so the guests would run out and they could run in and grab passports and valuables. This is exactly the sort of thing I would have done if I'd been a sleazy, gap-toothed Filipino bandit and therefore must be guarded against. So having ascertained the exact distance and travel time from my room to the fire escape (and attempted it at least three times blindfolded, once crawling, once hopping) I laid out my clothes for the next day in the order of underwear, socks, top, trousers and boots next to my already packed bag. Toiletries I am happy to leave behind because no amount of hospital grade Lynx can entirely mask that tangy hint of bubbling flesh.

Content in the correctness of my phobia I retire to bed only to be awakened in the pitch black of 5am by the fire alarm. My room is three metres from the fire escape. I could smell no smoke but I was on the third floor. Before you could say Mary Poppins I was fully dressed, completely luggaged and standing serenely on the footpath under my umbrella watching a parade of panic stricken US night attire for the fuller figure. The Filipino bandit in me was well pleased. I rang home and told Kaz a slightly embellished tale of harrowing survival in a dark city and claimed Nyah-Nyah points for my thoroughly vindicated paranoia. I breakfasted on what many of the English identify as food and drove off to today's motorcycle shop imaginatively named, The Motorcycle Shop. Strange really because mostly they sold tools, in fact they would have sold a lot more tools if you could work out which piles of tarnished metal were stacked to be thrown out and which

were to be added to a system of display known only to Nobby In The Dustcoat.

To this day the Brits still have a deep love and respect for the dustcoat; in factories that handle food they're white and complimented by cheeky, small brimmed white hats that Frank Sinatra might have worn if he'd been completely insane. In grocery stores the dustcoats are brown, presumably so they don't show the potatoes, however the favourite colour by far is grey. But not just any grey, it's that special grey in an old despatch clerk's cheeks just before he drowns in his last mug of milky, sweet tea. Grey dustcoats were worn by butlers beneath stairs at the better palaces as they polished their weight in silver, by audio geniuses who were engineering Beatles albums at Abbey Road, by men in horn rimmed glasses bigger than their heads conducting nuclear tests in the red desert of South Australia and at every other Imperial location where you find most things except dust. The second last thing you'll see in Britain is a dirty dustcoat, the last being a woman in a dustcoat. It's just not done. Why not? It's not as if they're specifically tailored for humans at all. They appear to be constructed in much the same way an Indian craftsman creates a suit for you in 24 hours. He cuts out a series of squares and oblongs and has small children stitch them together with dental floss by the light of a burning monkey.

So why no dustcoats for women? They have car coats, brunch coats, morning coats, fur coats(optional), house coats; and if you're wearing a house coat you're bound to come across a spot of dust, in fact you'll be hunting for it. Granted it's not apparel that would lure in

any milkmen under 60 but it would give the lady of the house that air of ordered competence that comes from having accurately read a gas meter or knowing on which shelf the bronze spedoodle shackles live in the back of a hardware store. This is perhaps something Dolce and Gabbana could have a crack at in between changing the drip on their models. A strapping young woman in a well cut dustcoat could be just what Britain needs to put it back on its feet again. Mind you the biros would poke out at an awkward angle. In the shop I bought some tools for a friend, which is not what it sounds like and just something men do for each other.

Back into the traffic in my Renault Thingy and the slow realisation that French vengeance for the Battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo is as brilliant as it is insidious. The French know how to make cars. Andre Citroen invented the helical gear and used it as his logo, Marcel Renault created magnificently fast and dangerous early racers, Peugeot came up with many mechanical break throughs (including the V twin engine in the Norton motorcycle which won the first Isle of Man TT...bored yet?) but none of this has ever made its way into cars sold specifically in Britain. I have owned three Citroens in Australia and apart from the niggling French inability to admit that a crusty bread stick in lieu of a computer chip may be a manufacturing fault, they were largely satisfactory in the same way that time and nostalgia can make root canal satisfactory. This I put down as accidental, but with the Brits it's altogether personal. Websites are jammed with cathartic bleatings from customers too polite to ever voice this much displeasure face to face to any Dustcoat of Authority and even while

being poked with these internally combusted bayonets of revenge they plan on perhaps buying another because they're quite cheap and rust in a picturesque continental oeuvre.

While changing gears in the Renault on the way to Hendon, my voiture, upon leaving a set of lights went:” Quoi? You want to use zat gear? Zis is vary inconvenient yer kner. For zis I must give you ze Clonk!” And so we got to know each other. Ze Clonk would occur at random intervals; while moving, stationary, in reverse and once when switched off and locked. Sometimes the instruments worked and at others they were showing barometric pressure in the Caribbean. Merrily the petrol flap would pop open and the resulting change in air flow over its sleek, powerful lines would cause the vehicle to veer to the left, but I was undeterred. The RAF and Battle of Britain Museums at Hendon were high on my list of must sees.

I am an aeroplane tragic; have been since I was small and my uncle took me to De Havilland at Bankstown where he worked and sat me in the seat of a Vampire fighter jet. I would go to Sydney airport and loiter around the hangars of Adastral Air Services where they still used ex World War 2 Lockheed Hudson bombers for aerial survey work. I can sit on my lounge and tell you what kind of light plane is flying over by the sound of its engine. I receive few visitors. The British know how to do museums better than anyone in the world. I like my history and tradition presented in an atmosphere of awe, respect and silence. I have no wish to go on an Abraham Lincoln ride that whisks you up his colon and out of his top hat with a fine view of The Bill of Rights Jumping Castle. The Halls

of Hendon smell of old leather, well worked metals and fluids that have been to war and won. Even as an adult many of the aircraft loomed much larger than my small boy's imagination. The display of the crashed Hurricane fighter and Halifax bomber pulled from a field and lake as they were found, were sobering reminders that war machines are built to kill, and stay aloft through the good ministrations of dustcoats and the whims of disinterested deities. The Brits, along with many others, have had to fight to keep what they've got but I can't help thinking that successive governments have sold them short. Naturally we in Australia are convinced the same system works just fine for us and why not? Leave us recall the parting words of Lord Sydney as he waved his hankie at Captain Phillip and the First Fleet? "Piss off Arthur"... he cried, "and take the government with you".

Feb 23.

You can't take your weather with you when you travel. Likewise your food, TV programmes and social niceties need to stay back at your place in a box labelled 'smug', otherwise you'll start comparing back home to your foreign holidayland and wake up as a Texan called Beadog or perhaps Jolene and spend two weeks reminiscing about McDonalds decor. My own particular day featured a peculiarly British rain that doesn't sound, feel or smell like anything else, especially on the coast. It's the same rain that soaked the Vikings through to their bodkins, created mud that swallowed the sandals of thousands of Roman legionnaires, rusted the armour of

Roundheads and Cavaliers while impeding the scissors of their hairdressers and in modern times spawned the invention of the bio-degradable shopping bag as a turban protector. I'm heading down the Channel coast to Whitstable in Kent to a legendary Vincent dealer, Conway Motors. Mr Conway is long departed but the current owner, Chas Guy, was a lovely chap and we chatted for ages over cups of tea. He offered to look after shipping for any bikes I may buy on my trip. It was a great shame that several years later he would die in a racing accident on one of his Vincents. I was there to buy Vincent bits for an old school friend, Andy Graham. Andy was responsible for my first motorcycle ride and journey. He had a 1956 BSA Road Rocket and on it we went to Catalina Park in the Blue Mountains for the bike races. I've had a soft spot for that model ever since, possibly to do with numbness in the bum cheeks that had me checking to see if my trousers were still adjacent. But Vincents! Vincents are the pinnacle for a classic bike fan. They were hand built in a small factory in Stevenage for an exclusive and well heeled clientele until the doors finally closed in 1955. Even though the early Japanese superbikes tried their best, a well sorted Vincent Black Shadow was still the fastest out-of-the-box road bike well into the 1970's. (Later in my life I would rebuild one and found it a testament to very clever engineers who saw no reason to use a simple solution for a problem when a dozen highly complex ones were much more interesting.)

The rain had stopped briefly and been replaced by a wind which had obviously been born on another planet and swept across the galaxies building momentum until it found somewhere it really hated. Whitstable was once a

large fishing port and is still famous for its oysters. From late July to early August they hold an Oyster Festival so don't say you weren't warned. More bike stuff; back towards London via East Sheen and Richmond to the shop of legendary (another one) Velocette man Geoff Dodkin who flaunted all tradition by coming to the counter in a white dustcoat. I purchased more bits for Andy and when I asked if he had anything non-Velocette for sale he took me through to the back lane and dismissively showed me a beautiful black 1961 BSA Golden Flash. For his arrogance I haggled with him in the hope that his biro might leak into his spotless dustcoat pocket in frustration.

Five hundred and ninety five pounds later it was mine and I studiously ignored his beloved Velocettes as I strode out to my Renault which went clonk at the touch of my key and ruined everything. I had dinner at the Hotel, often a mistake in the UK unless you're at The Savoy or really enjoy service ruder than a Japanese porn channel. The foreign Maitre'D was everything his lack of height promised he would be. You know a man is short when he looks you up and up. I couldn't tell what country he was from but it was patently better off without him. He got no tip tonight so hopefully his parents back in Gruntarovia would remain undernourished enough to produce no more waiters.

Friday Feb24

I awoke early, and satisfied there was no smoke wafting under my door, thumbed through a copy of Exchange and Mart, a useful publication best described by that famous phrase : "tell'em their dreamin." I was on the

lookout for an early 60's Panther. "In that case", I can hear you thinking, "You should have purchased a copy of Just Circuses incorporating Zoos2U.com". But no, this Panther is a journey down memory lane. When I was 18 my mother loaned me some money to buy a car and I came home with a shiny black 1949 model 100 Panther. This is not as heinous as it sounds, since the sum was a staggering ninety dollars. Eventually I would buy an 850 Morris Minor for ninetyfive dollars and get exactly my money's worth right up until the moment the engine dropped out through the rusted chassis and onto the road. Panthers were made in Cleckheaton, Yorkshire up until 1965 by Phelon & Moore who by that time should have known better. The original design of their 600cc sloping single cylinder engine dated back to before the First World War and was carefully upgraded over the years by changing the colour and adding handy features like suspension and brakes. They were built as sidecar haulers which is an acquired skill not unlike driving a tank across a tightrope. I tried to start it on many occasions and failed dismally. Bouncing up and down on the saddle going vroom became a poor substitute so eventually I sold it and gave the money back to my mother. Not a very good story I know, but it WAS my first bike so fuck ya. In any case this would be my Redemption Panther and so I spotted a red 1964 Model 120 with fully enclosed double adult sidecar for just three hundred and fifty pounds in Liverpool. I must admit that this is not as grand as it sounds. The proprietary manufactured sidecar was made of plywood with Perspex windows and by today's standards had all the crash resistance of a passionfruit wrecking ball.



For 60 years this was quite acceptable transport to the Brits until Alec Issigonis ruined their suicidal fun and created the Mini Minor. The best way to think about the UK motor industry is that while America was building super cars, England was building jolly sensible ones ( just so long as you don't have any children and your height and weight is roughly equivalent to two badgers full of pudding). I called the Liverpool bloke immediately and found myself speaking to the obligatory Ringo.

He didn't like to sell me the bike sight unseen but wondered if I'd also like a Laverda 750 that had once been an escort bike in Libya for Gaddafi. It had been left in the desert and was somewhat sandblasted, but was one hundred and eighty pounds and I jumped at it knowing that just the front brake alone was worth around \$900. When asked how he'd like the money sent, his reply of :”Just pop the cash in the post” left me gob smacked and wondering how a country so innocently trusting could not only win two world wars but also invent the mini skirt and not expect it to effect the national erection quota. Ah but of course, the Great Train Robbery! Ronnie Biggs and the lads stole the mail because it contained millions of innocently trusting pounds...and yet they still pop cash in the post.

“I say, it's Registered Mail you know, you have to sign for it!” Brilliant! Bang! ”Somebody start the car”.

I called Chas, organised for him to pick up my purchases and went downstairs to partake of a cup of tea and toast that had no right to be treated that way.

Hey ho and it's off to the West Country, which is a tiny island's way of saying ‘turn left and drive for one hour’. First it was the bike shop of the esteemed Bill Little

in Upper Minety, Wiltshire. He has a lot fascinating bikes in a beautiful old barn and (if you're interested) wears a brown dustcoat. I think I'm becoming chrome blind so I head for a culture and history injection in Bath. The town of Bath is one of those spots into which God put a lot of effort. You can't create the Earth in six days and not utilise some staff. I have it on good authority (the little known gnostic book of Habbakuk the Congested) that a chap called Gerard did the hills and valleys and around Bath he took particular care. The landscape folds protectively around the streets and lanes and picturesque homes all the way down to the River Avon and beautiful Pulteney Bridge, built by highly skilled worker bees from sandstone coloured honey.

At about this time another helper, Malcolm, popped in, saw the quality of workmanship and immediately invented some things called architecture, The Romans and The Georgians, thinking they might be jolly useful at a later date. The Romans got there first, noticed there were mineral baths that could soak away the pains of a long days march and set about knocking up the obligatory temples, spas and holiday resorts. They loved it so much that some never left and you can still see them many metres below the modern city in a thought provoking and brilliantly executed wander through the old Roman town. The thermal pools are still bubbling away oblivious to council regulations in surroundings made even more splendid by the Georgian architecture which carries Bath triumphantly on its shoulders through more than 250 years of bumbling building codes and salivating developers. Three cheers for those all important Englanders in hand

spun bicycle helmets and jolly green wellies who patrol the hills ensuring the past remains the future. The Royal Crescent and The Circus and Bath Abbey are stunning monuments to life before Gyprock, lovingly preserved in a setting best enjoyed at a walking pace. Nice work Malcolm.

I apply history to my accommodation arrangements and check in to Pratt's Hotel, open for business in 1743. It's weird to look out onto a cobbled lane from a room that was welcoming travellers when James Cook was 15 years old and just leaving a job in a haberdashers shop to eventually put to sea out of Whitby. It would be more than thirty years before any tenant in this room knew the place I come from even existed. I stroll around town under a pleasant soft drizzle and eat at Pope's Restaurant, built in 1880 although the food is quite fresh. I have a camera, which is rare for me, and I take some atmospheric night time shots. I don't like drawers full of photos. You put the memories in there and they lay in limbo; recorded yet forgotten like a relative whose face you can't remember and when you see their photo again it's never quite how they were, an officially documented disappointment. I prefer to try remembering and if it fades into the wallpaper of that little room in my head, it at least reminds me why I don't like wallpaper. Before bed I make a cup of tea and geology intrudes on history. Bath is built on limestone and the water bubbles up through it. The inside of my kettle is caked in calcium. If you lived here long enough and drank enough water, you could become a statue from the inside out. I think I could get an Arts Council grant for this.

Sat. Feb 25.

I take a stroll at 6am, reinforcing my belief that cities are at their most revealing before they brush their hair and gargle. Saturdays are always a slow start anyway and it's nice to hear my footsteps come echoing off the stone walls to put the street lights out. I used to work at Potts Point Post Office near Sydney's Kings Cross in the late 60's. I walked to work at 5am and there was an unexpressed shared understanding of what life was really like between the cops, garbagemen, hookers and mail sorters. That small gap in a city's timeline between when the bodies are buried and the flowers are planted. On the still dark streets American troops on R&R from Vietnam were being ambulated away to an appointment with a shiny metal bucket while the local denizens folded their wings and climbed into the fig trees to escape the light of day. I went and sorted mail, thousands of post cards from them boys sent back home to the folks in Gee Whiz, Oklahoma; Hoowee, Tennessee and Heck, Idaho. Most were written while they were drunk but such was the love in their hearts they often wrote all over the cards and forgot to put addresses. They covered one wall of the sorting room and every day I wondered how many of them became not-so-famous last words.

But there was none of that in Bath, not since the Romans left anyway. I take a properly guided tour of the Baths to make sure it all sinks in and then buy yet another bag, this time to hold Andy's growing collection of bike bits. You only make the bag mistake once, unless of course,

like my wife you find some sort of organisation in assembling a jig-saw of ten smaller bags into a digitally enhanced picture of Hell in an Airport.

At this time of year Bristol is famous for it's Bike Show so off I go south and forsake all the historic wonders of its harbour for the fun of the Showground, only to join a queue of people who must surely be lining up as extras for some BBC drama set in a black-lung infested mining village we're they're all on strike for more ferrets to eat. I was the only one not wearing an anorak crafted from a unique synthetic material that was combustible in sun light. On the practical side they do keep out the cold as effectively as they deter sexual advances. Every incarnation of motorcycledom was there, from the aforementioned anoraks to the flat cappers who rolled their own handkerchiefs to latter day rockers with hair coiffed into a nesting duck. The olde English beer tents were doing a gurgling trade as were the Thing-in-a- Bun vendors who specialise in spreading boiled onions over a creature scientifically bred deep inside some thicket in the Balkans to become a greyish-green pattie that reacts to sauce by appearing edible. Millions die from these every year and good riddance to them. Inside the various halls were, predictably, hundreds upon hundreds of bikes. I'm in heaven, but then slowly something unexpected happens. I'm bored. Well not exactly bored but probably that feeling Hugh Hefner might get around about 3am on a Saturday morning when he realises how similar the basic elements of any hobby can become when viewed en masse. Too much chrome, too much black baked enamel and more leather than a cow strip club (They are naked!

Watch them udders swing!) I needed air that hadn't been filtered through middle aged men and left slightly relieved but well contented.

Have you ever seen the Avon Gorge? I have. It's incredible and I wasn't even looking for it. I found it when I got lost so you'll have to figure it out for yourself. Basically it's an enormous cleft in the earth with a river running through it so it shouldn't be hard to find especially since it's spanned by the Clifton Suspension Bridge built by one of my great heroes, Isambard Kingdom Brunel. The British Empire under Queen Victoria was virtually bolted together by Brunel, an engineer whose ideas were so enormous and utterly ground breaking they could only have come to fruition when Britannia waived the rules.

Having travelled the southeast I can go I head north towards the Devon coast but on the way I spot a turnoff to Glastonbury. Young people know Glastonbury as the site of a famous music festival and over a thousand years ago it was home to another music festival called Church. For my money (and it doesn't cost much), Glastonbury has one of the most beautiful ruins in England and in a country where piling up old rocks is an art form that's saying something. It was in need of repair before Henry VIII got to it and tore it stone from lintel but he turned it into a monument that would inspire poets, artists, writers and itinerant Australians for generations to come. Henry is mostly remembered for his six wives (well five actually) but deserves to be branded as an even greater destroyer of beauty than the music video.

Glastonbury is shrouded in myth and legend as thick as its morning mists. The tower on the Tor looks

out over the countryside onto what is now dry land but was once water. The landscape was dotted with these hills and the locals waded or used a boat to get between them in the sacred vale of Avalon, which disappointingly means Isle of Apples but does give some Merlinites the opportunity to add The Garden of Eden to the list of mystical sites Glastonbury isn't. To ramp up the intrigue there is the marked site where the graves of Arthur and Guinevere were allegedly found around 1191 and gave Abbot Henry de Sully an added boost to the pilgrim trade thereby. It doesn't matter what or if you believe, even the Merlin boutiques and tacky new age shops in the High Street can't detract from the tranquillity that sits inside the walls, wrapped in romance you can wear on your sleeve. I love Glastonbury, although don't eat at the George and Pilgrim pub (built 15<sup>th</sup> century). You can sit and have a beer on chairs whose edges have been worn away by sword sheathes but I draw the line at food which has been carbon dated. I continue towards the Devon coast and find myself as night falls, in the major centre of Barnstaple. I close my day of history by booking into the oldest Travelodge in Devon...odge being an olde viking word for a small individual serving of packaged high temperature milk.

Sun. Feb 26.

Bells! Bells? Somewhere in the distance...and a lot of them.

Why would so many bells be ringing on a Sunday morning? Of course, the only religion in the world named after a country! All the Catholics could get on their masthead was grotty old Rome but here I am surrounded by the Church of

England, and very keen they are about it too. It's nice, in fact it's nostalgic. I used to enjoy walking down to St Silas in Botany Road, Waterloo in a jacket with a mothball in its pocket. I even had favourite hymns, the words of which I still recite to amaze friends who think they know me. All churches look old when you're a kid and this one was built round about 1880 of brick and sandstone and was pretty imposing for a neighbourhood church, but then the Catholics had the big school, church and convent complex on Mt Carmel and we needed a tall steeple to make up for their hill.

I loved the loud singing and occasionally in-tune harmonies but I also loved the smells. My mothball vied with old wood polish applied by old hands, cracked leather bound prayer books with a smell unique to their special tissue-thin paper with gilded edges, the mysteriously horsey aroma of a well trodden carpet strip, the mixture of moisture and earth as sandstone keeps doing what it does and Virginia ready rubbed tobacco in adult pockets level with my face. When the sermons droned on I looked up into the soaring beams at sheltering pigeons and thought that it must have felt like this in the ark. I always enjoyed Harvest Festival when the altar looked like a miniature of the produce exhibits at the Easter Show. You could definitely see that the Fifth Day's invention of the vegetable was still going quite nicely. One year we brought a pumpkin we grew ourselves which was fine by me since I didn't like pumpkin, but I didn't tell God that.

Thanks to Sunday School my Bible knowledge was going quite nicely, although one day I felt I'd missed something. I couldn't recall Noah telling anyone how to



vote when they landed and broke out the wellies, but prior to one election our Reverend put it quite plainly that if anyone failed to vote Labor they would burn in hell with the already smouldering Catholics. But there was something even worse and he could barely bring himself to rasp out the words...the DLP, Democratic Labour Party, for Catholic working class turncoats. A vote for them would see your anus filled with heavily pitchforked imps, your neighbours righteously burn down your house and your children have carnal knowledge of cats and dogs. Walking home after these occasions, my parents answered none of my questions. St Silas is of course gone now, replaced by a shiny retail centre constructed with the aluminium permanence of a caravan park. New money brings new gods and sins become the system by which they are worshipped.

But I'm sure it's not like this in Barnstaple. At this time of year churches are about the only thing open and a bit of communal warmth can be quite an attraction. If I'd left my trip till April everything would be dusted off and open to the public but as it is, most of the famous National Trust's famous picturesque piles of history are closed during the colder months for cobweb refurbishment, even Barnstaple's only famous place, Arlington Court (famous for its famous carriage collection) had the stable doors bolted, presumably while the horses were sunning themselves in Spain.

Damn! That means the famous Thwickford Teaspoon Experience at Smunley-on-Boink will be out of the question as well. Never mind, I amuse myself by heading south to Cornwall on a search for the not-very-

legendary village of Millbrook. Graham Pugh (real name!) is the warm-up comedian on Channel 9's Midday Show with Ray Martin and he does many very funny spots which audiences occasionally understand but which always make the band laugh; a sure sign of genuine funniness. Graham's stage persona is that of a recovering Cornishman trying to find some hope in a life whose gripping sound track is the blood coursing through his ears on their lonely pillow. He is without doubt one of the funniest, quickest and most relaxed people I have ever seen on a stage and blames his whimsical dullness on being brought up in Millbrook so I have promised many friends I would try and find it and take some snaps, should it not be too dull to show up on film. But no one has heard of it. Even the glummiest Cornish person I ask implies that Millbrook's very anonymity is a sign of how successful its dullness has become.

The Cornish really are quite different to their neighbours, they have their own flag and their own language (until the last native speaker died in the 1930s) and they're trying to bring it back. Apparently it's in the same language group as the Basques, although they wear very different hats so that's not a promising start. The coastline is dotted with the abandoned buildings of tin mines, which add to its windswept, damp, romantic melancholy. It is however, the perfect place for Britain's greatest legend, King Arthur and Tintagel. Unfortunately, being Sunday and outside tourist season it was closed.

I stroll down the deep cleft to the small beach but the gate up to the headland fortress is firmly padlocked in winter rust. Even if Arthur never set foot here, which he

probably didn't, in my mind's eye I can certainly see them smashing up the round table for firewood as another bitter winter screams in off the Atlantic. Tintagel is quite a pleasant little village if you can excuse the inevitable tourist tie-ins that come with the main attraction; Arthur & Martha's Tea Room, Lancelot's Plots (garden & landscaping supplies), Guinevere Dinnerware (which strangely only works in a Newcastle accent) and ExcaliBurton and Weems, Solicitors at law. I was among a grand total of seven tourists having their eyelids frozen open by a wind that did exactly the same thing to ancient Britons on this spot over two thousand years ago, except they might not have bought a souvenir teaspoon for their mother-in-law. Although they no doubt purchased some famous Cornish double clotted cream and took it home wondering what to do with it just as we do today....aah the closeness of history. I stood on the cliff top and surveyed the ruins, with that eerie feeling of walking in the footsteps of time.

"Fucken cold, idnet", said a voice from a big puffy anorak coming to the top of a trail on my left. "You're not wrong", I replied, picking up his accent and slipping into the appropriate vernacular." Where you from?" he asked. "Sydney", I said, "You?" "Perth" replied an apparent woman in a pinker version of the male anorak, which added "Dun get this fucken cold in Perth". The wind blew them away towards The Cornishman Hotel, never knowing that wherever Arthur may have built his Camelot it wouldn't have been in fucken Perth.

What a fool! I've allowed myself just seven days for this ridiculously quick peek at the UK. I like

the cold weather. I like its unqualified ownership of the landscape; the fog, the sleet, the soft drizzle that feels filtered through silk and the wind that drives all moods before it. That's what car heaters are for. Mine reaches a certain special temperature no doubt pre-set by the factory and goes Clonk. The accents on Radio Devon ("Hullo me dearioes!") only add to my enormous smile as I drive east towards Salisbury. On the way I stop to see what's left of once the biggest castle in Devon, Oakhampton Castle. It's closed, but I fix its drunkenly leaning walls with a concentrated stare (which costs me absolutely nothing) and move on well touristed.

"A ship of stone on a sea of grass" is how someone with a fine turn of phrase once described Salisbury Cathedral. I can see its spires in the gathering gloom. The first stone went into the ground in 1220 and the building and rebuilding is still going on. Sticking a squontillion ton stone building on a site called The Salisbury Water Meadow is a tradition many developers still adhere to today and encounter similar bouts of sinking as they did back then, once again the cornerstones of history are ignored by the plasterboard of the future. I follow the high stone wall around the Cathedral Close and check in at the White Hart Hotel, a beautiful Georgian establishment in St. John St. I don my most shapeless windproof jacket and blend in with the locals on a stroll around the cathedral, clacking some atmospheric snaps in the fading light. The flat green expanse of the Close really is like a sea and the vast building draws you towards it and closes out all the surrounding scenery, like those moments at a concert when you zone in on a solo performer and the

rest of the room goes black. Inside it's even more breathtaking with columns soaring up to intricate heights from flagstones as big as their namesakes. The devil may have all the good music, but God has the architecture thoroughly sewn up. I have to touch things, run my hands along the stones. Just five years before this building was begun the Magna Carta was signed and they keep one of the original copies of both it and the Domesday Book on display in the Charter House. Even the Americans talk in whispers, so job well done. The restaurant at the Hotel is fabulous and I retire happily to my sumptuous room surrounded by wonderful history and muzzled Milwaukeeans.

Mon. Feb. 27

I don't know what I expected of Stonehenge. If it was the privacy of ancient contemplation, the A303 tearing by within spitting range of its doormat put a stop to such romantic notions. At least the Motorway splits it off from the parking lot, which is on the other side and allows you the dramatic urine tinged entrance of a council designed tunnel under the road. On a dark morning full of sleet even the druids have stayed in bed with a nice bowl of gruel and some light reading carved into a pebble. I wander alone around the monument pondering all the usual questions. Why drag these stones across half the country and why put them here? Did they really know some universal secret that we've forgotten or did they look into the future and realise that this would be a great spot to hang advertising from directly adjacent to tens of thousand of cars a day? How did they know what a car was? I realise that my favourite

holidays are ones that make me think. Any idiot can lie on a beach and order umbrella drinks all day but it takes a special kind of idiot to dress up like a damp Michelin man and trudge around a bunch of rocks in temperatures that make it difficult for male penguins to find their butch bits.

I wring myself out, climb into the car and head for Winchester amid a series of random euroclonks, which by now could mean anything. It's hard to get your travel timing right in the UK. In Australia we can jump in the car, pick a direction and once we clear the city edges be pretty assured of seeing nothing but bush/desert, chunks of slow wallabies and tyre peelings for the next seven hours. In England everything is just a little way down the road, but there's so much to stop and explore in between it can take a week just to get to the shops (so long as you're keen on checking out the Spagforth Dimford Harness Museum, the Chumleyford Centre for Petrified Stumps or the Pomfret Magna Collection of Roman putty). Personally I have tea towels and spoons from all three. I can't recall why I chose to visit a wool shop rather than the famous Winchester Cathedral but I bought Kaz an 'exclusively' designed jumper made from Shetland wool. Even though they are particularly small ponies I imagine you could get quite a bit of wool off them once you overcame the foul temper of Short Horse Syndrome. Winchester is a beautiful town but in a misjudged effort to work my way back to London I end up in Reading which is spectacularly unspecial and I head off to Henley-on-Thames for one last night in the countryside. I feel steeped in Englishness at the home of the famous Oxford/Cambridge Regatta. I grew up on books like Meredith and Co and the Just William stories of life in

a jolly wonderful school where the bullies invariably get their comeuppance, the senior boys are always understanding and helpful and at least one artistic and wistful type dies picturesquely each year. These days they've gone from turning out spiffingly educated cannon fodder to Britain's great comedians and actors, most of which have probably thrown up on the fresh green riverside turf of Regatta Week right where I'm standing. You can't get that kind of ambience on the tatty banks of the Yarra. I check in to the Red Lion Hotel built in the 1600s, on the edge of the river right next to the old bridge. Some of the shops are still open in the early dark of the dying winter and in a fit of madness I bought one of those tweed hats that you put on right after you grab your shotgun and head out to vaporise something cute. It's a cold weather hat, you see them sometimes in Tasmania where they seem to fit in, otherwise you look like a dick unless you're delivering a calf in Yorkshire.

In the olde worlde bar of the Red Lion I meet a few of the locals, one of whom talks me into the regional equivalent of Vegemite. As Australians there's nothing we like better than the strangulated grimace as visitors sample the national spread for the first time. At Henley it was Brakspear's Bitter. I love British beer. It has individual taste, character and doesn't need to be served at cryogenic temperatures like our indigenous swill. After my first sip, to the delight of the bar I was informed that the unusual taste was due to the urinals of all the pubs being connected back to the brewery to preserve its unique flavour. No locals touched the stuff, consequently Brakspears now no longer brew but instead gentrify 'olde' pubs with decent

food and beer that doesn't smack of inner tube and cigar butts.

An ancient relative, Nicholas Breakspear, was the first and only English pope in 1154, Pope Adrian the fourth. I assume he was a wine drinker. Tomorrow it's back to London and then India! After a phone call this afternoon I discover that because I'm flying out of London on a non IATA airline (PanAm), my carrier who'll be taking me home (Qantas), won't touch my unaccompanied luggage for Australia. I'll have to hunt up an airfreight company in London for an outrageous \$7 a kilo!!

There's nothing like living in the past. It's always cheaper.

Tues.Feb.28

The London Embassy Hotel welcomes me with the fondness of a returning disease so I go shopping to ease the pain. Harrods is a stirring example of what can be achieved by fondling the purses of the rich and tolerating the credit cards of the rest of us. Large department stores in Australia are actually merchandise museums where vacuum cleaners and Lladro ballerinas can be displayed in a shiny well lit environment completely unspoiled by any kind of service or assistance. Should you require any of the latter it is reluctantly delivered either by a long serving employee who is so experienced they have obviously evolved beyond the capacity for mere shoppers to comprehend or the usual drip of new blood who has to defer to her superior for everything including the details of which hole her air goes in. Everything is on display but nothing is actually in stock and if it was, it couldn't possibly be given to you today



because...well... you're you. I once tried unsuccessfully to buy a vacuum cleaner at David Jones. There were ten models on display but you weren't allowed to actually touch any of them, ironically their accrued dust was so thick they all needed a good vacuuming. At Myer I did the unforgivable and took the only electric piano keyboard they had, then waited at a register queue for 20 minutes only to be told they didn't sell the power adaptor for it nor did they take American Express. I tossed the keyboard to them and didn't wait to see where it landed. This would never happen at Harrods and the PR manager of Rolls Royce in Conduit Street once explained the principle to me thus:" If we turned away every dodgey looking character with the arse hanging out of his jeans we would never have sold three to Mick Jagger. We assume that everyone who walks through our door can afford the vehicle and we treat them accordingly." I myself only bought two; a black one for formal occasions and one in desert camouflage, which apparently isn't all that unusual; although I went off them when I saw an Arab Sheik step out of a Silver Shadow that was tastefully presented in bright metallic turquoise paint with a white vinyl roof and chrome wheels. Three weeks earlier in Ashfield I saw a Datsun 120Y done out exactly the same way and in a contest for re-sale value I'd say the Datsun was a clear winner.

Shoppers of the Middle East persuasion were well represented at Harrod's although the chinless wonders and their pinkly cardiganed wives were still in the majority. On the second floor, laid out on an enormous table was a dinner setting for twenty four people specially made for Edward the Seventh. It could be yours for about

the same sum as the Riadh Rolls Royce. The most amazing thing was you could pick it up and handle it...one broken piece and you no doubt owned it. I turned around to see a fabulous set of life size Royal Doulton porcelain dalmations.

A pup of the trio was tucked under the arm of a five year old and being dragged across the floor to Mummy. Distracted from possibly admiring a Burberry dildo she glanced at the child and said: "Put that down Nigel, Grimshaw's brought the car around". The pup dropped with a thud onto the monogrammed carpet and they sauntered away in a cloud of old money.

The class system was still alive and well and Harrod's is where you can buy some. I chose a very expensive dressing gown for Kaz which literally fell to pieces the first time it was washed, proving yet again that class doesn't always mean quality...a nice chenille number from Kmart will last you a good ten years. I took the escalator to Children's Wear, expecting to see small kiddies being weened onto silver spoons and bought Morgan a cute cardy and a duffle coat, spending in one fell swoop more money on tiny clothing than I'd spent on myself in the past three years. At least I now had the cache of a plastic Harrod's shopping bag. Strolling around Kensington I found a leather jacket for Kaz and some comedy LPs that would become, with a very satisfying irony, tax deductible for Qantas comedy. Due to the chilly weather I was wearing my new tweed hat, which in the trendy Kensington environs was practically de rigeur. I was comfortable in it, I fitted in, my head was warm. In Harrod's Hall of Dead Pheasants and Shotgunned Ducks I was even deferentially smiled upon. A man in a hat

like this obviously knows the kick of a Bentley 12 bore and the dutiful snuffle of a loyal gun dog.

Gibbo didn't think so when he spotted me back at the Hotel. I am apparently hilarious. Unfortunately when Gibbo laughs hysterically it is best not to be within a 10 metre radius. He has no shame and so will never know the touch of tweed. Happily his laughter evolves into hacking bouts of coughing and he begs sympathy for early onset pneumonia and perhaps even pleurisy. My upper class hat allows me to extend the hand of friendship knowing that he's also missing his less proprietary stimulants. He was hoping for a buzz from his injections for India but no such luck. He leads a simple life based on: "when in doubt, eat" and so he dragged me to lunch at a tacky place in the Tottenham Court Road called 'Clouds'. The indifferent service was supplemented by pastel wallpaper that I'm sure was scratch and sniff. How can you get 'International Cuisine' wrong when it's only a baguette's throw across the Channel? Our indigestion wasn't helped by the cab ride to Turner's Air Freight to send our excess luggage off home.

"Where you from, Australia? Never been 'ere. Dunno why people want to travel so far. I was born in Shoreditch, never been out of London. Everyfink you need is right here mate. I need a bit of a change I duck darn the old Elephant and Castle, know what I mean? All these back streets? Oh yeah, best to use 'em vis time a day like. Don't worry, I'll get you vere. 'Ere we are, ten quid, lets call in an even twelve. Right you are, toodle bye."

At least he didn't do two choruses of Umtiddle tiddle tiddle um tiddle ay.

Next it's off to a Post Office to send the money for the Panther and a chance to experience that great British past time of queuing. Nobody does this better than the Brits. They bring a patience and serenity to it that almost tempts you to thank the Postmaster for having eight counter positions but only two staff on duty. I used to work in the Post Office and I understand why this is done; because we can (thanks to a union negotiated trade off between low wages and a sense of power). I am not a waiting type person. If I had to queue up to breathe I'd have to give it some thought ( mind you I've been an asthmatic all my life so that wouldn't really be a big ask). And so I waited surrounded by the relatives of those who waited for the Spanish Armada, who groaned admirably as the Black Plague passed, sang songs while the Luftwaffe bombed London to see who would get bored first and those whose patience went unrewarded as Maggie Thatcher remained unlightning struck. The Upper Classes are never found at the Post Office, they need not wait for anything. In fact the Queen is actually excused stamps and need only draw her face in the top tight hand corner. The Postal Clerk takes my envelope stuffed with three hundred and fifty pounds cash and consigns it to the Imperially endorsed safety of a big canvas bag. All this comforting confidence from a nation that is still suspicious of tea bags.

I call home. I've always wanted to do this trip but its funny how you discover that sometimes home is not so much your country, as that tiny space on the end of a phone. Tomorrow is a 5.45 am start for the airport and Gibbo has gone out drinking. Hmmm.

Wed. Feb 29

It's a Leap Day but there's been nothing on the news. Somewhere out there people born the same year as me are twenty five percent younger and I suspect the BBC is involved in a cover up! Gibbo is actually on time with a functioning head so off to Heathrow to get rid of the car and book in. We had to fly PanAm because they were the only ones who flew direct to New Delhi, a mere five hour flight...but not so fast. Their computer is down for an hour which could mean someone forgot to turn it on, the staff are surly and well past their 'Have a nice day' quota. On the plane (a 747 so old the windows had wooden venetians) we were treated to service from stewardesses who had flown with the Wright Brothers and used cigarette ash as a coffee topping. It was a mere hop and a skip to Frankfurt to be just in time for a three and a half hour delay as we waited for the New York flight which had been snowed in, possibly by the Head Steward's dandruff. Wandering Frankfurt Airport's moderne halls I come across a shop which sells spy equipment like tiny cameras, shirt button recorders and a brief case phone. There were also handy knives that folded inconspicuously and spring loaded stilettos that spronged out of innocent looking attaché cases all available at Duty Free prices. Luckily they didn't sell box cutters.

Finally it's back on the plane as it creaks its way east. I wasn't game to fall asleep in case I accidentally swallow a rivet. The movie is Brainstorm with Natalie Wood and Christopher Walken. Would it stand the test of time? Better than poor old Natalie it would.

Thurs. March 1

Swathed in a fine cloud of aluminium filings and indifference we arrive at New Delhi Airport at 3.20am. I say airport in deference to the concept of it being a place where aircraft might come to land. The plane stops out on the perimeter and a bus, one bus, comes to pick all 290 of us up. No doubt other buses will arrive when their drivers wake up. Not really. One more arrives and we experience for the first time, Indian driving. Even on the vast empty expanse of an early morning airport the driver seems to be searching for something to hit. In lieu of a straight line he chooses self imposed quick swerves and jerks that send people and luggage flying around down the back. He smiled all the way and was well pleased with the carnage when we finally reached the terminal, a long narrow room with two ceiling fans that regularly repositioned the evocative aroma of saffron and dung. Being a PanAm flight, the two queues we had to form were liberally treated to choruses of that old American favourite:” What kind of a country do you people think you’re running here?” At the head of these two queues were two customs men sitting at two desks with their pens in a line and their stamp pads freshly inked, looking over their shoulders were two other men in customs uniforms whose only duty seemed to be to look over the two seated shoulders.

It was here we all learned the importance of “the uniform” to the proud Indian civil servant crouched within. All Indian uniforms are designed (thanks to the Raj) to look officious, but to really succeed they must also *be* officious...but not just ‘be’. They must be the well spring

from which all bastardry flows; the boiling bowl of magma that expresses its majesty by spewing molten planet onto its slopes to increase its all conquering bigness. At 3.20am in a steaming long shed lit by the red glowing veins in American foreheads it was bigness at its biggest. The officer in charge was immaculate, his two thick eyebrows combed and oiled to follow the contours of his forehead like two black Staffordshire terriers laying by a fireplace. His matching black horn rimmed glasses protected him completely from any imported sense of humour and he sat with clenched buttocks to make himself two inches taller. He reached out his arm, a pencil clasped in his hand and with long experienced flicking motions directed the two queues into ever straighter lines until he was satisfied that everyone was frustrated and angry enough to meet the Levels of Frustration and Anger Requirements (Inbound Non-Residents) as set down in subsection four, paragraph (b) of the Indian Customs Foreign Holiday Enfuckingment Act. The Americans helped him out by Goddamming and Geezlouiseing to each other as he eagerly awaited the opportunity of sending to the end of the queue the first one who stepped over the painted yellow line in front of his desk before they had his Official permission to come forward.

Life was good. He would show them what sort of a man four dollars fifty a week buys in The Indian Customs Service. At the back of one queue a not unfamiliar business venture was about to blossom which would make his Staffordshire terriers very contented indeed. A 30ish Sikh businessman in a Saville Row suit stepped out and began to collect passports and money from other waiting

Indians. As he moved down the lines he slipped half of the notes into the relevant passports and the remainder in his pockets. He strolled to the front of the queue and placed the rupee-supplemented pile in front of the officer. Without looking up he went to work on the passports with his rubber stamp, the documents forming one neat pile, the money another and in between, the official endorsing never missed a beat. In fact its rhythm increased until only the moisture of the ink kept the rubber from melting. His arm never faltered until, the pile completed, he handed the passports back to the amateur immigration agent who led their owners out between the two desks to freedom like the Pied Piper of money. He never looked back as at least two American thermometers of righteousness exploded through the tops of their owner's heads.

Gosh was damned again and even Jehosaphat was seen to be jumping as the Americans cut the cheesecake of foreign policy with the sledgehammer of understanding. In an effort to fit in, many threw fistfuls of US dollars on the tables and gave his black horn rims a good work out. By the time we reached his desk the now much wealthier officer was positively happy to see us. "Australians! Very good, very good indeed." He knew there'd be no tip but at least we had cricket in common.

Once through Customs we needed to change some traveller's cheques, so on to the relevant office. This is a very grand description for the phone box sized booth that contained four more men in crisp, clean shirts all poised for document perusal. Two of these chaps were seated and the other two stood behind them with a little shelf each that folded out of the wall to just clear their



seated colleague's heads. In this tiny space even oxygen would have been struggling for elbow room, but their officiousness had vast uncharted regions all its own. Mr.Shirt-seated- right frowned at my passport, my airline ticket and my traveller's cheques, shook his head disapprovingly, initialled them and passed them to Mr.Shirt-seated-left. He muttered some ancient gibberish and held the cheques up to their one light globe, no doubt in an effort to flaunt the latest security technology. He stamped the cheques and handed them over his shoulder to Mr.Shirt-standing-left. He used his authority of height to hold my passport next to my face and consider whether or not I was blurred enough. He took out his pen, paused and gave me one of those "you're lucky I'm in a good mood today" looks so beloved of tiny pricks with tiny power. He initialled the stamp and passed it to Mr.Shirt-standing-right. From a secret compartment, possibly a body cavity, he produced a pile of rupees that appeared to have been used as bandages the last time the plague popped around. He counted them onto a small tray, added a grudging hand written receipt and passed them forward to Mr.Shirt-seated-right who counted them again and smeared on a few of his own personal, favourite germs. Strangely, after the Customs capers I was already adjusted to how things would be when dealing with proud men in starch. I signed yet another piece of paper, handed it back to him and smiled in a way that would guarantee Gibbo's transaction would take twice as long. It was nothing personal for these men of importance, they treated everyone this way until they got home to their wives, who tonight would take those once crisp shirts down to the stream and beat them against a rock

until their husbands took them off and dragged themselves back to the kitchen and the real seat of power.

We rescued our bags from an ever increasing pile of rubbish with handles and stepped out into the vast beehive of India. Accosted is a rather inadequate description and attacked too severe, but in between is the Charge of the Delhi Taxi Drivers. I have to keep reminding myself that snoring out there in the dark is around a billion people, which explains why 270,000 of them feel the need to be at an airport at 4am to fight for 290 passengers and their freshly infected rupees. By comparison a rioting football crowd charged by mounted police could be described as merely jostled. Our bags were grabbed and we had no choice but to hang on and follow them to a waiting ubiquitous Hindustan taxi. The Birla Group build this mainstay of Indian transport while the Tata Group seem to look after whatever's left.

The Tata family own everything that is worth owning in India and if it isn't worth owning it will be by the time they're finished with it. Trucks, cars, hotels, resorts, airlines, heavy industry, iron and steel, shipbuilding and much more all carry the Tata brand of products designed for the Indian market. New Tata trucks, for instance are copies of Mercedes trucks from around 1956 (except many of them have wooden cabins). They use simple diesel engines pumping out simple diesel fumes; they're very tough and easy to fix. One night I saw one pulled over for a roadside repair. The engine had been lifted out courtesy of a strong rope and a tree limb and a local specialist was heating up the crankshaft as a technical assistant fanned the flames of their blacksmith's forge in order to render the

crankshaft hot enough to straighten with a very big hammer. The truck would be back on the road by morning, probably not covered under warranty.

Our taxi (and every other taxi) was a Hindustan Motors Landmaster; a copy of one of England's ugliest, a 1956 Morris Oxford II. A vehicle carefully designed to look like it could be about to motor off in either direction at the same time. They feature a scaled down version of the truck engine and a toughness that sees them still running long after the seats and bodywork have been replaced by sticks and string. Gibbo called on his 'old India hand' negotiating skills to work out a price to the sumptuous Taj Mahal Hotel on Mansingh Road (an address that immediately added another 50% to the deal); with the driver and his friend in the front we piled in the back and set off to pollute the warm night.

We would learn that everyone with a vehicle seems to travel with a friend or relative, probably to push them home, but in the early hours of Delhi darkness this began to make Gibbo suspicious. When we turned off the main road into the back streets of a village he masked his fears by taking the only action a man of his talents and neuroses would deem reasonable. He pretended we were CIA. In a voice that was a cross between Nixon and De Niro he said quite loudly: "You know Bob, if we don't call in to headquarters at Langley from the hotel they know we're staying at by 5am, this town'll be crawling with CIA guys come breakfast time." I gave what could only be construed as a quite reasonable reply; "What?" "You know what I'm saying Bob, nobody fucks with the US government. That's why I got this tracking device with me",

he babbled on. Even though I knew what he was playing at I was tempted to suggest that the tracking device might be too close to his brain but instead asked the driver how long the trip would take. He replied by saying that he would be picking up a cousin on the way and it wouldn't be long. In the end three more of his relatives were jammed into the cab and then dropped off along the way; which was a shame because I was curious to see how many more passengers it would need for Gibbo to take off his shoe phone and call The Chief. The sun was just coming up as we turned onto one of Delhi's wide boulevards and pulled up at our truly magnificent hotel.

The general hotel rule in the UK is the bigger the foyer, the smaller the rooms. Happily this didn't apply in India where our foyer was a marble football field. With maximum politeness and genuine regret we were told our rooms weren't ready but they would look after our bags for us in a special room and not drop kick them down into the cellar with the hyenas. It was 6 am with nothing special to do so Gibbo suggested we get a cab to Connaught Place and peruse a wakening Delhi. Connaught Place is basically two enormous concentric circles packed with people, narrow lanes, broad avenues and a huge circular central park, just the sort of thing you'd enlarge upon if you were 19<sup>th</sup> century Britons blessed with a huge workforce that reacted quite enthusiastically to the prod of a bayonet. As we strolled through the park we were approached by a boy about 8 years old. In the Goldilocks book of begging he was not too scruffy, not too shiny and just the right shade of Hindu to make even a German tourist feel comfortable.

“Pardon me, but would you like to buy some hashish”, he said.

So here we are, two convivial chaps who had never been known to turn down an opportunity for some alternative enlightenment; far from home and right in the middle of a big exotic city...what could possibly go wrong? Fortunately we knew what could go wrong so we shook our heads at him and walked on. Street vendors in New York can be pushy, in Bali they can be tenacious, but in India not even Sigourney Weaver strapped into a loading bay robot could pull them off your face. The kid tried again, this time in French so we stopped and shook our heads, unbeknownst to us we must have done it in German because that's what he tried next. No luck there so he moved on to Italian...niente, so he skipped across the Alps to Spain to be met by more synchronised head shakes. He was obviously running out of white folks. What would it be next, Swedish? New Zealand? What we didn't expect was Russian, for which we gave him a round of applause. He went back to English and asked where we were from. When we told him he smiled knowingly and said: "No worries mate, want to buy some shit?"

We didn't but we gave him some rupees for the performance and the information that he spoke Russian because they supplied the Indian government with military equipment and in part payment received R&R holidays for Russian soldiers who surely must have been comprehensively baffled by just about everything.

As the city's day brightened somebody reached for its volume control. If the dawn comes up like thunder

off Mandalay it comes up like a never ending train crash in Delhi. Sikhs in tuk tuks follow us offering hash at the top of their lungs, little kids wake up from their footpath bed and chase us for shoeshines (instantly I spot they are referring to **our** shoes since they don't seem to own any). Gibbo is keen for us to walk through some of the really squalid areas, watching for my reactions from the corner of his eye. India can be very confronting but poverty as a tourist attraction is boring. What a fabulous gift the caste system is for any government, evil or otherwise. Any religion that tells you its okay to spend this life in the gutter so that in the next life you can be a maharajah or perhaps a butterfly is really only hanging in until the population gets a good eyeful of the possibilities available to them on cable TV reality shows. Indians are incredibly adaptable, even Ghandi drank his own urine and he could have had a cup of tea anytime he liked...with milk and two sugars.

In one small square about a dozen taxis are reverse parked towards a central hub, like spokes in a wheel. Their boot lids open down instead of up and rolled out from inside were rough cots with sleeping drivers in them, while others sit on the lids and warm themselves at the pile of burning leaves constantly being topped up in the centre of the hub. Its 12 degrees centigrade this morning and for once I know what the poor people are doing, although these guys would never see themselves as poor. Indian men are very proud, they have a job, a cab and a place to sleep; a place to relieve themselves as well and unfortunately it happens to be where we're standing. We come upon a group of soldiers at an old British Army barracks sitting round yet another fire that attaches itself to my memory.

They say smell is a powerful trigger for memories. Burning leaves will always take me back to India. Once you spot these columns of smoke you realise they're everywhere and even before the first black diesel cloud containing a busful of unwitting accident victims hurtles onto the streets, the city is already inhaling a handsome overcast of toxins that makes a perfect romantic, mysterious photo for the folks back home.

At a bus stop the scenery comes to life. People roll out of the bushes and brush themselves down, others take a morning crap behind a tree while one guy snaps a twig off the same tree, pares the end and uses it as a toothbrush as he stands in line for the bus which is quite literally on his doorstep...if he had a door. Indians have no fear of death, if they did they would never step onto that bus, or failing being able to step on, cling to the bars on the windows as it delivers them into the arms of Yama. Buses are very cheap to travel in, consequently maintenance is so minimal that the passengers are often required to help out as part of the superstructure, holding the larger bits of rust together while cornering. There are many large roundabouts in Delhi and at full speed their suspensions, repaired mostly with rope and stout banana fibres allow the buses to tilt at angles usually only experienced by professional motorcycle racers. They are, however, much safer than driving. In most countries, if you sit at a strategic location long enough, you can eventually figure out the mysterious forces that allow people to get from one place to another at maximum volume and minimum skill without actually distributing their organs to onlookers.

In Rome they practice slow motion chaos simply because a femur at 90 degrees can ruin the cut of Armani track pants. Even Bangkok has a kind of Buddhist logic to philosophical gridlock but in India you're caught in the middle of a stampede of blindfolded lemmings. They display no patience, no courtesy, no culpability and above all no fear. Since drivers are mostly all men their pride will not allow them to acknowledge that a gap which would be a tight squeeze for an anorexic rat will easily accommodate their truck if they just drive fast enough. This year around 80,000 Indians died in road accidents and another 180,000 were hospitalised (by 2010 it would be 150,000 and 3 million) so it just shows what you can achieve when you really try.

Gibbo leads me down the steps at the back of Delhi Railway Station for my first encounter with begging lepers. These are the same as non begging lepers but with something to catch money in...or possibly with. In the loading yards were hundreds of horse and human-drawn carts waiting for business. He tells me that on his last trip they still used death carts which would go around and pick up bodies overnight before the vultures could get at them. I was about to give him a sound poo pooing when one swooped down and picked the eyeball out of a dead horse. Suddenly Salvador Dali meets Bugs Bunny because these are exactly the same type of vultures that can give you so much trouble in cartoon deserts. You know the ones, feather collar and long shaved necks, the models for Montgomery Burns? Has too much television deadened my perception of reality? Ehhh...could be! Stepping over more beggars and dodging women thrusting babies at us,



we make our way back to Connaught Place oblivious to what a right thinking wealthy westerner 'should' be feeling. But it is what it is...Delhi.

Apparently in a mood to laugh death in the face for breakfast we hail a cab and get a vehicle that hadn't been a cab (or anything successfully mechanical) for quite a while. Its driver was an ancient chap dressed in white with a red turban who appeared to have been run over several times and left to get on with it till his blood ran out. We jumped in the back only to find ourselves sitting on the floor as the rug covering the seat springs gave up all pretensions of supporting anything heavier than air. After baffling him by giving the address of our hotel we hopped and chugged down the road for about 300 metres where our doughty Landmaster gave out a clonk loud enough to have been fully imported from France. We stopped. Very slowly our dessicated driver pulled himself from his seat, opened the boot and shuffled round to the front with a screwdriver and large hammer. The weight of the bonnet was almost too much for him but no doubt channelling the welcome release he would get from banging the crap out of the engine gave him the strength to force it open. So began a performance that would be repeated three more times. After the second time we were going to abandon him to abusing his vehicle but by the third time we thought we owed it to him to see it through since at this rate he could obviously only cope with two or three fares in a day. Naturally the meter was in the same condition as the hamsters in the engine so we paid what he asked and threw in enough for a new hammer.

The hotel doorman took one look at our cab and subtly beckoned some flunkies to push it down the road out of sight and possibly beat the driver until 'poorly' described his overall general condition. Here we see the real power of the white uniform at work! I have no idea how, in a country devoid of so many western accoutrements, they can get their whites better even than Omo white. Is there a secret ingredient and if so, how do you add it whilst banging clothes against rocks. Are they special rocks? Why don't clothes go dirt colour when you rub them on rocks? I can understand how they contain an element of fabric softener, you'd be soft too after a wet pummelling every day but that blinding whiteness must annoy the new improved additives out of Reckitt & Coleman. In any case here's how yet another uniform thing works. If you're tall with a turban with a red sash round the middle of a Delhi dazzler then you win. For a start you're a Sikh, part of a warrior caste that is tops at drinking, fighting, taking orders and then passing them down to the lower ranks. They are excellent administrators and follow the teachings of twelve prophets that seem to mostly revolve around recipes and eating. No wonder they rarely turn up as underfed terrorists. We book a tour to the Taj Mahal for the morrow on a 'luxury air conditioned coach' and retire to our freshly prepared rooms and on the way marvel at the Indian economy in action. In the giant tourist-friendly foyer all manner of mechanical appliances were employed to shine, sparkle and disinfectant but on the floors above vacuums were replaced by hundreds of people on their hands and knees with brushes and dust pans and cleaning

rags made out of what they'll be wearing home. If I never need light bulbs polished I know where to come.

After more than 20 hours on the move sleep was inevitable.

I awoke at 5pm and flung open my 5 star curtains to see a Warner Bros vulture in a tree outside waiting to do bit of culling the feeble on the streets below. I wandered the environs and met up with Gibbo for an excellent Indian dinner, especially when he bit into the world's hottest chilli and proceeded to douse the fire with his beer, my beer, our bottle of wine and drinks from two amazed tables nearby while calling for the fire brigade and a throat specialist (preferably not Indian) in that order. He was still unsettled as we moved on to one of the hotel's bars where a local band was busy interpreting Van Morrison (It is a very wonderful night for a Moondance don't you know). Wary that too much drinking might turn curry into lava he retired early in a flurry of theatrical mouth breathing. I wish he'd stayed because he may have spotted something I'd missed. Around about midnight I held my glass of gin up to the light and noticed a slightly oily film across the top. On sniffing the contents I was whisked back through my childhood to those nights when my mother would refill our kerosene heater. Was I drinking the good Gilbey's Made in England gin? No I wasn't, this was local produce and a mistake of massive proportions, but at the time...I felt fine. So before going to bed and booking a 6am wake up call I ordered a healthy full English breakfast of fried everything.

Friday March 2

When brekky arrived at the appointed hour the room service lady wisely took two steps back as the aroma of bacon and sausagey goodness wafted up into a head that had no safe place to keep it. I slammed the door just in time to see the all important fire escape notice obliterated by curried kerosene. I had one hour to get ready for the bus knowing full well this would be impossible without scaffolding and a concrete head protector.

Gibbo could give smug a postcode. I walked into the light of his satisfaction with a complexion not unlike poached offal, a vision my breath had already embraced. Gibbo was an old hand with the home made gin and wisely chose to view death as a spectator sport...I feel my low point may be the high point of his trip. A vehicle arrived which was neither luxury nor coach but blue with bars on the windows, probably the sort of thing they moved prisoners around in.

It was already well packed with tourists and we made our way down the back to discover our seats were short thin pads bolted directly above the wheels. Gibbo made conversation with the couple in front by speaking an unintelligible pseudo Swedish dialect liberally peppered with gestures towards me which unite all cultures in unsympathetic mockery of hungover fools everywhere. I was in no mood when the tour organiser tried to be jolly. He was obviously the record holder in perpetuity of the World's Greasiest Indian competition. Ever watched that famous Mexican bandit scene from The Treasure of Sierra

Madre (“We don’t need no stinkin badges)? Greasier than him! Not only that, he had a gold front tooth and gold arm bands that held up the long white sleeves protruding from his black waistcoat which also had ...wait for it... a pocket watch on a gold chain. What could possibly go wrong?

Well for starters we still had a few more tourists to pick up. These we found waiting outside a hotel with a big banner which read “Oberoi Grande welcomes delegates to the All India Leprosy Conference”. The bus was already crowded but somehow our new passengers found they were in no danger of their personal spaces being invaded. Some fellow travellers even pushed their faces right against the window to give the delegates that extra room. Lovely. Finally the bus was full, but being India this meant nothing and an hour later we pulled over to let on a woman and four children. Our tour guide had decided to take his family along for the ride and came through the bus looking for people to give up their seats for his freeloading brood which meant either standing or getting cosy with the leprosy people. He stopped and looked down at me completely unaware of his enormous error. “Pardon me sir”, he began, “would you mind standi...”. “Fuck off” I replied helpfully. I must point out that this is not normal behaviour for me but neither is a three megaton hangover. Could the man not see I was obviously wearing a pressure cooker for a hat? Could he not understand I would quite happily feed his entire family into a blender if it wasn’t for the noise? No. So he persisted:” With all due respects that is no way to...” “Fuck off” I offered, finding some comfort in those familiar short syllables. His look told me I had earned his contempt but I would happily double his earnings to make

him go away. He did and the rest of the trip to Agra was as hideous for me as I'm sure he hoped it would be.

The Taj Mahal is breathtaking, from the pools and fountains, manicured lawns, and walls of freshly whisked marble to the beggar pissing on the door jamb as we walk up the steps. It is, after all just a building for a pair of dead rich people and history won't buy you a handful of rice when your roof's made of cardboard. I sit on a balcony overlooking the meandering Yamuna River and try to envisage what the matching Black Taj would have looked like on the other bank if the money and the Maharajah hadn't dried up. It was probably for the best since urine always shows up against black...so I'm lead to believe. The Yamuna is tenth on the list of the world's most polluted rivers since it carries the waste of Agra's 1.5 million residents but I have faith they can make it to single figures soon. The Red Fort was also a mighty piece of engineering and yet more proof that from Italy to Greece to Cambodia, when mighty civilisations fall the only monuments they leave are to their ability to build monuments.

“The poor are always with us” says the New Testament prophetically. I checked the bus for Matthew but he wasn't on the tour. Every time we stopped we were covered in human blow flies impatiently awaiting their next incarnation as IT moguls or Bollywood choreographers. Gibbo decided to scramble their ability to beg in any language by simply shouting the names of our friends at them. “Keith Scott” he would cry or when particularly vexed, “Graham Pugh, Graham Pugh”. Baffled, they would leave us for the matching tartan shorts of Mr & Mrs Wot-

the WoahNelly of Lint Falls, Nebraska while Gibbo tracked down a specialist in snake draping. To my knowledge Gibbo has never kept a pet in his life (free range rats and mice excepted) and is completely lacking the danger gene so I have no idea where this need to be wrapped in a live Boa comes from. I take lots of photos while awaiting the telltale clacking of Scrabble tiles in a bag, which is surely what snapping vertebrae must sound like. I can only assume he's reliving a little read chapter of a long lost Kipling. I would ask him but I'm fairly sure he's never Kippled. He was also keen to pose in front of landmarks and one of the most famous shots is his enormous face grinning at his American Express card while the Taj Mahal crouches humbly in a corner. The sights having been comprehensively seen we must now steel ourselves for the four hour return journey.

Goldtooth must have sold some of the passengers to passing bandits as there are now plenty of seats for his charming family. He doesn't bother with a head count and herds us all back on board while slyly handing a bottle in a brown paper bag to our driver. On the way to Agra we noticed that all of the factories seemed to be empty but now we pass millions of people making their way to work through the gathering dusk. Summer is coming and they've changed the start times around to avoid the brain poaching conditions provided by Wall Street's most caring manufacturers. The global economy only really works equitably if your name happens to be G. Humphrey Global. As night falls we are privileged to witness the migration of the suicidal commuters. As I've mentioned, buses are dangerous, but at least you get to

travel inside them. The ubiquitous Tata trucks punch through the night like the unguided weapons they are. There is obviously a national competition amongst truck drivers to make the exteriors as garish and ostentatious as possible. This is a good idea because it hides the blood smears and dried garlands of pedestrian entrails. They all subscribe to a celestial insurance policy that guarantees every single one of their gods a portrait and quotation space just in case the driver should take a wrong turn and plunge off a cliff (this being the single most stated cause of traffic deaths in Indian police reports apart from:” I am a man therefore I must drive...tell me what is the key for again?”). Indian Traffic Cop is the planet’s most pointless job. Everyday, armed with a whistle and a long stick shaped disturbingly like an elephant’s penis, they put their flesh between the metal and splinters of the world’s worst drivers.

Lots of cultures have their own particular traits. For the Brits it’s stoicism and tea, the French have arrogance and cigarettes while the Americans bask in their guns and obesity but for Indians it’s their inability to admit; 1) they don’t know the answer to your question and 2) they may be wrong. You can understand that when transposed onto road rules they triumphantly lead, as already mentioned, to the highest traffic fatalities this end of the galaxy. You could ask an Indian for directions to Skagway, Alaska and he’ll encouragingly point in a nearby direction that may or may not include up or down. “Do you know the way to the Post Office?” will draw a confident smile and a knowledgeable discourse that will have you circled by buzzards in the foothills of the Hindu Kush by lunchtime. Of course all of this is wrapped in the famous Indian



politeness which makes you so grateful for their help. This is why I find it hard to feel sorry for the hundreds of people clinging to nets draped high over the trucks that go thundering by us in the night. Many rupees will buy you a seat on one of the long wooden pews inside the wooden cabin where someone will invariably be preparing a meal over the naked flame of a small cooker. Feel like chicken? Pluck 'em if you got 'em. Meanwhile outside the lesser rupee'd hang like suicidal pirates from boarding nets thrown across the overloaded cargo. This is apparently normal, just the usual evening commute minus the newspaper and the headphones and the opportunity to make it home without an autopsy. Just because they're dotted with travellers like tics on a buffalo doesn't mean the trucks slow down at all. Its full throttle and eyes closed all the way with an unshakable faith in a future that can quite patently be shaken. Personally I would be permanently screaming in transit but that's just the soft Western tourist in me.

Villages flash by as fireflies in the night and factories in the distance belch pollution and light into the still hot air, striving for a future that will never include those toiling inside. The global economy rolls on and it's best not to be standing in its way when you're washing out your loin cloth. Our bus pulls over at a small cluster of rusted things and Goldtooth brings our driver yet another bottle in a brown paper bag. He must be very thirsty because he's beginning to drive like a man who could use another drink but at least my hangover is gone and in the blessed relief my life no longer seems as precious as it

ought to be. I should be worried when we veer across the occasional yellow line but everyone else does and it seems to work; in fact it works perfectly right up until the moment it doesn't. The trucks keep barrelling past the pockets of light where people sit and talk, drink Campa Cola, fix things with hammers and sell old soft drink bottles full of petrol for the endless procession of scooter and motorcycle riders. Campa Cola and Thumbs Up are India's answer to Coke and Seven Up and for this they are to be muchly admired. Some time in the recent past Coca Cola (which was successfully bottling and selling bajillions of doses daily) became not unjustly incensed when the Indian Government demanded they either hand over control to an Indian owned company or pop the secret formula on their desk by close of business Friday.

Obviously they were not aware they were dealing with a company who sent their representatives ashore in the second wave on D Day to set up factories to supply US troops with a fizzy taste of home. Coke (no doubt after heated legal battles where they encountered the Governments inability to admit; 2) they may be wrong) closed up shop and moved back to where their right to be right was enshrined in the Constitution.

Thus Campa Cola and Thumbs Up became the national drinks with the reassuring guarantee that their sweet sugary goodness will kill you just slightly slower than drinking the water. The chemists at the factory came up with two unique tastes that hurried me back to my youth. Forgive me father for I have sinned...I was on the B team. I drank Pepsi and Tarax lemonade instead of the above, I smeared Marmite (not the national delicacy Vegemite) onto my toast and I

shovelled in Weeties instead of Corn Flakes because in the battle of children's packaging characters it made more sense to go for the wheat grain dressed like an Emperor Humpty Dumpty than a red and blue chicken. Campa and Thumbs Up reminded me of those choices; not quite as good as you'd hoped but a nostalgic trip back to the days when you could only find these tempting flavours in medicines. The driver's medicine was working quite well and he was now spending more time leaning on the horn, probably in an effort to judge the velocity of the vehicle against the speed of sound.

Eventually the leprosy delegates were dropped off (as it were) and we found ourselves safely back at the hotel where Goldtooth effusively farewelled Gibbo and pointedly ignored me, which I saw as much more vindicating than being bluntly ignored. The bus grumbles off in a cloud of his relatives and brown paper bottles and another day on the sub continent comes to a close. After watching several hundred people being blown up by hand grenades thrown into the streets of Amritsar we cancel our internal flights like the cowards we are and think instead of relaxing in the less homicidal environs of Udaipur. I retire sober to my room and pretend not to notice the smear of recycled currie clinging to my fire escape diagram no doubt as a subtle reminder that I am a fucking guest in their country.

Saturday March 3

Why are Saturdays and Sundays included in holidays? They're days you get anyway...they're yours, why should you have to spend

them with 9 million people all looking for somewhere shady to sweat? But I digress. Today we sight see and we hire a car and driver for an outrageous \$21.50 a day and what a surprise it's a white Landmaster but at least it has air conditioning. The other preferred car in the country is the Fiat 1100 marketed under the Premier brand, which marries all the complimentary elements of Italian electrics and reliability with meticulous Indian construction and attention to detail. If you slam the door hard the paint falls off, a special feature in any man's language. We have many things to do today, the first being a visit to the American Express office to get cash and then to Qantas for Gibbo to reorganise his flight details.

Upon leaving the clean, shiny, flying-kangarooness of Qantas we encounter the young modern Indian tourism entrepreneur in action. At the bottom of the stairs lurks an individual in a long overcoat and a big hat which just made you want to cry out: "He's got a bomb". But no, he had a business proposition. Many airlines were grouped in this one building and he saw this as his chance to offer a local service to Americans and other certifiably insane members of the travelling public. With a Phantom of the Operaesque flourish he threw open his coat and said: "Excuse me sirs but I can get you a much better ticket at a much better price than those robbers upstairs". Now who wouldn't leap at the opportunity to do a deal with a man in a special coat equipped with little pouches holding tickets in all classes for all airlines...and in alphabetical order no less! I resisted the urge to purchase a first class Lufthansa ticket to Vienna at a third of the price when the ink came off on my fingers, but there's a backpacker born every

minute and I wished him all the best. Back at the hotel we used their travel desk to book into the Lake Palace Hotel in Udaipur (as seen in the James Bond film *Diamonds are for Rich People*) and then once more into the waiting Landmaster to go to the Indian Airlines office and book our flights to Udaipur and to Bombay for the connection home. I was disappointed to find no one in a coat at the bottom of the stairs but was at least encouraged to ponder how bespoke Indian tailoring was forging new frontiers in wearable shop fronts for the itinerant tout.

With our travelling future secured, our driver takes us to the home of Mahatma Gandhi. So far it is the only place where everyone shows reverence. There are no hawkers around, no beggars and the silence (with Delhi roaring it's way through the day outside) is both eerie and moving. We walk in the back garden and pause at the spot where Gandhi was shot, unwittingly creating a career path for his political progeny. Inside the sparsely impressive home are mementos of his life including a pocket watch he was wearing, broken and stopped when he fell to the bullet in the garden. It made you pause and think, especially when, a little later in the Gandhi Museum, we paused and thought at another pocket watch broken and stopped by the moment of his death. Now breaking one watch when you're shot is unfortunate, but breaking two! At exactly the same time! What are the odds? Still, probably best not to ask. After all for a thousand years there were enough pieces of the True Cross floating around Europe to build another ark and it takes nothing away from the greatness of the man who carried India on his shoulders into the modern age; albeit with one watch too many.

Our speedy white steed now takes us into the heart of old Delhi. Architectural evidence suggests there has been a city on this site for over 5000 years and many of its bins are still waiting to be emptied. Here there is a narrow street for everything. Need a gearbox for a 350 Enfield? Then pick from a street with a hundred shops; wheels, two hundred shops. Want only slightly useless second hand tyres? Five hundred shops; welders, engineers, pots, pans, glass eyes, bakers, barbers, weavers, Eskimo fondlers, all with their own street of shops. I say shops but really they're holes in walls about the size of an average small car and you can buy all the bits to build one of those as well. How anyone makes a living is beyond me. At least they have somewhere to sleep although tractor exhausts make for a lumpy pillow. Take away the modern junk for sale and it would have been exactly the same two thousand years ago with exactly the same real estate values. It would be a shame to ever lose these parts of old Delhi but in a city this ancient everything has always been for sale, but, if I'm honest, possibly not intimate access to Inuit. As an inveterate collector of rusty, broken things this place is perfect and I have no doubt that deep within this rabbit warren of tetanus and spare parts someone is carefully nailing together India's next nuclear deterrent from rat droppings and old headlights. Gibbo is bored, he doesn't see the beauty in an oxidised bonnet ornament or the glory of piles of second hand spokes tied in little bundles and sitting on a counter like corn stooks at harvest time so it's back to proper tourisming.

Next stop is the Qutub Minar or Stone Tower begun in 1193 by Qutab-ud-din Aibak (obviously not a

local) and added to by his successors, as over the years they felt the need for more public erections. It commemorates the defeat of Delhi's last Hindu rulers at the hands of passing Muslim fanatics, reminding us as ever that the man with the biggest sword always has the biggest god. It is an impressive monument and by no means alone in the world pantheon of ancient reminders of who fucked over whom. Not that many people in India actually care about the past, as simply making it to dinnertime seems to take up most of their attention. It has been largely overseas scholars and a handful of dedicated Indian archaeologists who are rediscovering ruins and in fact entire dynasties that had been flattened under the juggernaut of time. (FYI, juggernaut comes broadly from the name of the huge chariots that carted images of the gods through the streets of Orissa around two thousand years ago. Lesson ends.) In the same complex as the Stone Tower is the Iron Pillar, a seven metre high relic of the great Gupta Empire that resists corrosion and miraculously everything else given Delhi's level of pollution (which on a good day you have to chew through to reach the oxygen). This is an even more fabulous feat of the foundryman's art when you consider it may have been cast over three thousand years ago. We would have trouble recreating this today so why do we keep forgetting this stuff? Why do we need to spend umpteen billions sending up satellites and radio telescopes when blokes dressed in sheep skins figured out how to read the heavens with a circle of rocks on Salisbury Plain? How could we forget this sort of information? Its fortunate no one had to remember the recipe for fire otherwise we'd all be coughing up fur balls for dessert. Gibbo gives it a

passing glance as he seeks out yet another opportunity for reptile draping. I love history and I'm sure Gibbo does too but I suspect that for him, it has to be funny, like perhaps the Six jokes of Henry the Eighth or the War of the Englishman, Irishman and Scotsman commemorated at the battlefield of Great Chortling near Little Titter. The very foreignness and immensity of Indian history makes it difficult to come to grips with and I suppose there are only so many jokes you can make about cattle having the right of way.

We drive off with Gibbo happily flicking snake shit from his collar and head for the Palika Bazaar, buried beneath the inner circle of Connaught Place. It is a vast labyrinth of shops and stalls selling everything the modern tourist or local could need from the latest electronic turban coolers to adult igloo stirrups (nah, I lied about the last one). With the ceiling only just over two metres high and the corridors not much wider, the atmosphere is very...hmmm, saffrony. In fact everything in India is saffrony, from the hotel soap to the Chinese meal we had last night, to Campa Cola and even the dye in monks' robes. It's a wonderful olfactory memory but when attached to a few hundred thousand shoppers in an enclosed space it's a lot like trying to breathe with a chicken biryani strapped to your face. You know you're looking at quality products when you see shops offering Sany stereos and Rolecks watches. The bazaar must be what a bee hive is like inside, should they ever wish to purchase sunglasses (Shop 24. 'No exchanges before 2pm') or an alarm clock, toothpaste and socks that come across a little saffrony. We buy several Indian movies and some fan magazines and I take a few rare, pointless



photos but as I put my little Sureshot back into the case on my belt I hear some swarthy types in a doorway mutter:” Look, moneybelt”. I have never worn a moneybelt in my life and I don’t intend to wear a rusty Delhi blade either, so I keep us in the well lit areas and they lose interest, possibly catching the scent of a moulting American. I am not a people person and I am even less a crowd person and I am even more lessly a one-of-two white faces in a big dark visaged subterranean crowd person. The magic of Palika bazaar is ended and we must find our way up into the fresh air that we know has already been filtered through toxic diesel engines, a few million cows and even more millions people and saffron...still, if we didn’t recycle our daily environment, jungles full of otherwise unemployed trees would have nothing useful to contribute.

Back at the hotel I look through my movie fan magazines and discover that the only thing more devastating than being an Indian movie star is being an Indian movie star the Bollywood system no longer likes. Some of these people are accused of sins massive and prolonged enough to make the Spanish Inquisition run out of wood. In any other county libel lawyers would have a field day but apparently in India what the studios make they can also break; and so we read of the case of Bumdrip Soopalu once heart throb to the masses and now apparently involved in a steamy affair with his three year old niece and two goats. This is truly the Bahgavad Gita’s ‘hating of a million hates’. (Actually I made that quote up but I’m sure if you were Bumdrip you’d agree with me.) Almost as bad is the ridiculous adulation attached to current favourites, which has them lauded for everything from performing

micro surgery on injured amoebas to curing cancer with their hair oil. TV Week never looked so benign. Incensed, I have read up to page 137 when I realise our flights to Udaipur on the morrow are yet to be confirmed. As I have noted I am an organised traveller. If everything is in its proper place, what's left is simply maximum enjoyment. I travel in a glitch free zone but I feel a fret coming on. Indian organisation of any event is notoriously unreliable, from plane tickets to pocket watches. Now I am pacing as Gibbo starts to laugh. Gibbo had already collected the tickets and, having finished his magazine was waiting for my head to explode as a prelude to dinner. I will kill him tomorrow. And then again the day after that.

Sunday March 4

No gin, no hangovers, no worries. Just a little squirty, but moving on... we depart for the airport and the 55 minute flight with Indian Airlines and I approach the check-in with thoughts of sharing a rust and splinter bench with a lady who's filleting a goat. But no such luck, it's a brand new safely dull 737. The only curious thing about the flight is the snack. No pakoras nor even a tikka to bless myself with but a cheese sandwich the size of a playing card about three inches thick. Two point nine nine of these inches are bread and the rest isn't, mind you it was beautifully presented. A smooth landing takes us to a rough terminal and another opportunity to be the human puck in a game of cabby hockey. "This must be what it was like for Elvis", I thought as a lapel and some hair came away in the hands of a feverish tourism graduate, then a quiet voice in precise English whispered in my ear:" My name is Ramesh,

I have a very clean, reliable taxi and I will happily take you wherever you need to go.” Surrounded by the Federation of Udaipur Transport Hyenas we leap at the chance. He may have been lying but we would have gladly helped jump start his water buffalo just to escape the chaos.

As it turns out he is a gentlemen and a man of his word and probably much too good for the likes of us. He is proud of Udaipur, a city in Rajasthan state set around several lakes which in turn are ringed by the Aravalli Hills dotted with seemingly unnecessary battlements and forts along their crags. These were built in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by someone who doubtless knew that nowhere is really all that safe when Hoardes are about.

Ramesh gives us a brief rundown of the history while he takes us (against our wishes) to the Indian Airlines office... and he seemed so nice too. We naturally assume we are about to meet his brother-in-law the travel agent who may even be our pilot and baggage handler on the return flight.

But Ramesh is the genuine article, he knows about the Internal Flight ticket Lottery and makes sure we get guaranteed seats for the flight out. I can see how this sort of thing can happen as we give the agent our details. Proudly he types our names, addresses and passport numbers into his shiny new computer, then, just as proudly he takes down the rest of our details and issues the tickets with his shiny new ball point pen. ”So far we only have a partial programme in our new system, but it is cutting edge”, he assured us.

I bit my tongue and reminded myself that his piece of paper, in the wrong hands can also have a cutting edge. I hear a

chuckle behind us and turn to see an Aussie who appears to be auditioning for the next 'Indiana Jones and the Franchise of Gold' movie.

His mirth results from a deep understanding of the Indian relationship with Western technology. He is a specialist diesel engineer and is off up country to a road and bridge project being carried out by an Australian company. When they began they had the latest bull dozers and heavy machinery and everything was going well so they handed over supervision to the Indian partner in the contract. When the dry season hit, every surface turned to fine dust and clogged up the air filters in the engines. In a Titanic-meets-iceberg moment the local mechanics helpfully dispensed with cleaning the filters by throwing them away entirely and pressed mightily on. That part of the country boasts no ordinary easily-Hoovered dust, but a coating so abrasive you could strip a turtle back to its underwear in two minutes flat. Thus the outrageously expensive equipment toiled on until fluids turned to concrete and metals went thud-clunk-pingingly over budget. Undeterred, the impressive local spirit of improvisation came to the fore and the bull dozers were harnessed to bull elephants, which managed to bring construction to a more familiar Indian pace. His unenviable job was to take his spanners and fix things...by the side of the road...in the dust... and then inject some organisation. Personally I'd have sent a hit man and a vet.

Ramesh continues his tour through this quite beautiful city that is yet to be over-run with tourist types like us. The streets are clean and the buildings shiny and even the farmers in the fields are spotlessly dressed, the

women with bangles of gold up their arms. Still, it's nothing a good B&S ball and a ute donut competition couldn't fix. Udaipur has many industries on its outskirts and also universities and agricultural colleges so in the general Indian scheme of things it does quite well. Think of it as their version of Newcastle except it has history, culture and things you'd want to see. Eventually Ramesh takes us down the narrow road to the small wharf in front of the City Palace and the boat that will take us out to our hotel, The Lake Palace.

We book Ramesh for tomorrow to go and see some temples he tells us are off the beaten tourist track, since we have no wish to end up as beaten tourists we welcome his expertise. The Lake Palace is entirely made of marble and seems to float on the still waters, which was the illusion the Maharaja Jagat Singh II wished to create when he built it in 1746. Four acres of marble and carved stone island set down into a lake twenty four years before James Cook pondered the bark lean-tos of Botany Bay. It's obvious some cultures just haven't put in the effort. We wander round the battlements of the palace and relax in its cloistered gardens with their carved pillars, sparkling fountains and sheltered walkways. We sip chilled Kingfisher beers as swallows swoop in and out of the lakeside bar and we wonder what the poor people are doing...oh there they are polishing the steps and fishing for our dinner. I love it when the system works. Our twin share room overlooks one of the gardens at an outrageous 450 rupees a night (\$45) so we rush downstairs to book another night only to find that all of the peasant rooms (ours) are

full and they only have large suites with sitting rooms for 1200 rupees (\$120)...what the hell, we'll split it!

The hills change colour every few minutes and the sounds and smells evoke one of my favourite movies, *The Man who would be King*, naturally enough from a Kipling novel. We peruse the small market in the Palace and adjourn for some more Kingfisher beer then swap to Kalyani Black Label which we very soon discover is 8% alcohol. Oh well, at least it isn't gin. Lights begin to glow around the lake as the smoke of burned leaves wafts across the water, fish jump in the twilight ripples and the night settles on Udaipur as it has for more than two thousand years. Yes definitely 8%.

Monday March 5

If I am witty awake, apparently I am hilarious asleep.

According to Gibbo he was lying in bed chuckling to himself until 2.30 thanks my terribly entertaining snoring. The man is a fool, he cannot tell the difference between snoring and creative breathing. I have a doctor's certificate and everything and I'm thinking of finding an agent! We breakfast in style on the terrace and catch the boat over to meet Ramesh at 10am. He is on time and his cab is sparkling like the automotive gem that it is. Rather than do the local sites of the city we have left him to choose interesting spots a little farther afield.

First stop is 23 kms north west of Udaipur at a town called Nagda (established in the 6<sup>th</sup> century) and a small complex known as the Sas-Bhu temples. Some of it is still slightly awash and there is a project going on to save it

from the waters of Bagela Lake. The two main temples were built by a mother-in-law (Sas) and daughter-in-law (Bhu) and dedicated to Lord Vishnu. Not much was known about them until a few years ago when a team of German archaeologists went to work deciphering the beautiful carvings and glyphs on the pillars and ceilings, most of which seem to depict fucking, getting ready to fuck or relaxing after elephant sex. One is tempted to assume Sas and Bhu shared similar interests, which truly exemplifies the power of history to enlighten because if they were into flower arranging, grotty little tourists like us wouldn't be half as interested. Ramesh was one of the German expedition's drivers so he picked up as much information as he could and is just the right man to have around, although we did save him the embarrassment of explaining the ceilings. They're not as inspiring as the Sistine Chapel but they all have that uniquely Indian feature of being able to poke your eye out.(2012; These have now all been preserved and the precinct is on the tourist trail of Udaipur)...but we were poked first!

Driving in India is, as I have mentioned, both suicidal and homicidal but we feel safe in the trusty hands of Ramesh; that is until anything vaguely vertical enters the mix. On the nice flat lands the national technique involves a subtle combination of insanity and speed but as soon as the vehicle begins to point upwards, rules are applied from the book by that revered doyen of sub-continent road safety, O. Houw Fuktarwee. In this he cites the research of little known Bangladeshi physicist Jumtwat Kaboom which states that any vehicle's width will decrease in proportion to the application of unreasonable speed; thus

the faster a vehicle travels, the narrower it becomes. This theory is regularly disproved several thousand times a year by the burnt out wreckage adorning the slopes of mountain roads, wreckage not unlike that strewn beside our upward route. Cabs, cars, trucks, minibuses, big buses anything that can roll and burst into flames has been professionally crash tested by single minded, confident amateurs for whom a nail clipper is the pinnacle of mechanical co-ordination and personal prowess. Ramesh, however, has an excellent functioning brain which he intends to keep safe inside an unbroken head for the foreseeable future and spares us the many opportunities his countrymen generously offer us to be pecked at by buzzards.

The road takes us up to what looks like a set from a very well art directed horror movie that depended on mood rather than acting. Daylight thinned as we drove into a cleft in the mountain just wide enough to accommodate two very fast, thin cars. The front door steps began just over an arms length from each cab window. We pulled into a small courtyard and began our walk through a village where quartz was the main building material. Obvious really, since they hollowed out a mountain of the stuff to make living spaces. Saffron light filtered down into these small canyons both man made and natural; the stillness broken only by the soft farting of holy bovine sphincters. In one of these clefts was a series of carved temples in all shapes and sizes, 108 of them, sitting around the edges a marble courtyard, in the centre of which was the main temple. Ramesh kept up an explanation of the basics of Hinduism but I'm still baffled, although it definitely has a cunning plan when it comes to keeping the peace. All you



have to do is keep your followers so busy trying to appease all the gods and attend all their festivals that they simply don't have the time to blow anyone up. Mind you, it is a lot easier to sit in a cave, get drunk and hallucinate while your wife supports you with her profitable merchant business, so top choice Muhammad.

The devotion to their various gods is displayed by the beautiful workmanship of even the smallest shrine. Ramesh advises us to step over the beggars and not to shake hands with the lepers as we make our way through their specially designated area. Even abject misery has its rules. The centre of the courtyard is empty as we approach the main temple, which is about the size of an average two bedroom home (without the McMansion package and parking for the boat). The light waits outside as smoke plumes from a thousand incense sticks valiantly battle each other for control of a room that hasn't been aired for 1500 years. Inside there is a carved wall not unlike those in a confessional (so Gibbo the relapsing Catholic tells me). It has a dull sheen to it, just like the railing that runs along two sides of the small room. On closer inspection we find both the railing and wall are made from intricately worked solid silver, about 12 metres long and two metres high. In an embarrassingly Western moment I can no longer see the main statue with its four faces of Shiva but rather Scrooge McDuck rubbing his feathery little hands together. It is only reasonable I must join the shuffling queue to place a garland of flowers over Lord Shiva and pray for suitable cultural adjustment. This is the great paradox of India, enormous wealth and riches attended by enormous poverty in the certain knowledge that the tables keep turning and

this life's beggar could be the next life's test cricket match-fixer. Even though the great juggernaut of history must always be rolling, it does seem patently unfair that long ago craftsmen could create a wonder like this in silver and now no one remembers their names. We leave the faithful to their devotions, rejoin Ramesh and marvel at the views of the lake on our way back down the mountain, not even noticing two of the three vehicular murder attempts upon our persons.

Next stop is in town at the garden of the Five Fountains...well actually it looks more like an overgrown abandoned movie set. If this is a tourist attraction they certainly weren't prepared for welcoming visitors, until Ramesh greased the palm that protruded through the vine covered rusty wrought iron gates. Inside he explained there were five gardens built by a local big turban (the wig was yet to be invented) to impress the suitors he needed to snare to woo his five daughters. History doesn't record whether there was a surfeit of eligible women at the time or if the daughters perhaps resembled the south end of a north bound cow...wholly holy as that may be. In any case Dad was intent on making an impression but not at any excessive expense. The first garden was pleasantly ramshackle until Ramesh unfolded some more rupees and the flunky in residence ducked off to turn on some taps.

Suddenly there are fountains, small waterfalls and little rippling streams running around the border and in patterns across its weedy beds. You step up to the next low walled garden and the same feat of liquid magic is repeated and then again all the way up to number five...the magic being that the original flow of water from Garden One is all

the water there was. The house and garden were built before the lake was popped in and at a time when water was at a premium. So through an ingenious system of wheels, lifting buckets, gravity and strategically placed turncocks, all operated by flunkypower the show went on. As you passed from one garden he channelled the same water uphill into the next so Dad gave the impression that he was as rich in water as he was in daughters. It was an intriguing demonstration of brilliant hydraulic engineering that we couldn't achieve today without electric pumps, 12 months of legal wrangling with the council and Jamie Durie. Even if Dad hadn't gotten rid of his daughters he at least would have picked up some handy landscaping contracts when the first casino arrived. Its name is now Sahelyion ki Bari and it's been developed into one of Udaipur's many attractions. The name means Garden of the Maids of Honour, which may or may not have been a little marketing ploy on Dad's part. No doubt by the time the last one went to a good home there'd been a lot of water under everyone's bridges...not to imply she was that kind of girl.

Back at the Lake Palace, and they have moved us into our new room...well I say room but its more like a space in which warring nations sign peace treaties. It is impressively enormous. On a skateboard you could shorten a leg going from one end to the other. The floor is intricate parquet marble, it has a giant changing room, deep bay windows that loll out over the lake, a beautiful brocade lounge suite and antique dining table and chairs and from the 8 metre high vaulted ceiling hangs a crystal chandelier the size of a small car. It looks suspiciously like a subdivided ballroom of which the poor people would have

been justly proud, assuming they were allowed within splashing distance of their Maharajah in any capacity other than bait. This will do nicely.

We now come to the highlight of Gibbo's trip (the thought of it still kindles his charcoal-like heart more than 25 years on). We booked a boat trip around the lake at 5pm and a quaint machine arrived looking not unlike the one used by Bogart and Hepburn in the African Queen. About 20 people were sitting comfortably under its tarpaulin shelter as we pulled out into the late afternoon lakelight. It all went very well despite my constant awareness when on water that I cannot swim. I have tried but I have negative buoyancy (no, not made up for insurance reasons), which allows me to sink at speed in any depth taller than me. I just can't float, apparently its something to do with bone density. Unfortunately I had told Gibbo of this condition and he peppered our captain's helpful tour chat with whispered reports on the current plunging depth of water and several suspected crocodile sightings. He is not normally a cruel person, simply **ab**normally.

The boat takes us to another lake palace, Jag Mandir, which has been abandoned allegedly because a muslim once stayed overnight when the Maharajah was away elephant tinkering. Consequently it is picturesquely overgrown with vines, ancient trees and whirlpools of dead leaves in the twilight breeze. If I were a vampire or recovering werewolf I would certainly consider squatting rights. (Today, in 2012, the palace has been restored and is now happily open to money of all religions).

We troop back onto our tiny boat and it chugs merrily into the middle of the lake until it wraps a fisherman's net around its propeller. Gibbo's gaze upon me becomes intense and the sides of his little slitty mouth turn up in an unsettling impression of the grille on a cheap Hyundai.

"Deepest part of the lake apparently," he smiles. "How are you doing?"

This is the wrong question, the correct one being "What are you doing?"

The answer to this is making a short list as follows: 1) Are we in danger of sinking? 2) Given that we are in the hands of a possibly Indian co-ordinated rescue attempt, how much quicker will we sink? 3) Should I take off my tall cowboy boots before they fill with water and drag me down even faster and beat Gibbo to death with them? 4) If the crocs in the lake are quite small freshwater ones could I jam their jaws open with skinny people? 5) If all else fails I shall use Gibbo as a flotation device. As these thoughts flashed through my mind I turned to him nonchalantly and said: "I'm coping".

This provoked gales of laughter and an incessant catchphrase of which he never tires. Surprisingly I was coping thanks to an exercise I once put myself through on Lake Macquarie.

My father thought the best way to teach me to swim was to drop me out of a small fishing boat on Botany Bay. It was how they did things back then apparently. I was about 6 years old and responded in the way nature had intended by promptly sinking. I can still clearly see the faces disappearing above and the light

fading with increasing depth. I compounded the problem at school swimming days by adding asthma attacks to any contact with deep water (possibly a reaction to the Botany Bay 'accomplish through fear' method). Hence swimming and I were never comfortable together. In the early 1970's I was living right on Lake Macquarie at Mark's Point, just three metres from my front door to the water and it seemed like such a missed opportunity that I decided to conquer my fear of deep water. I strode manfully round to the boat hire guy, selected a tinny with a small outboard and motored towards the deepness. To help me in my plan I had brought a flagon of red wine and consulted it often until we both felt quite safe and adjusted to my small universe and its benign minimal rocking. Then the storm came up. Drawing on my grape calmness I pulled on the starter cord of the outboard. It was the first of many pullings which lead to an accompanying number of swearings. By this stage the lake had become quite choppy and the tinny was lurching about and taking water. There was only one thing left to do as the rain pelted down...row. In the 35 hideous minutes it took me to get back to shore my fear of water had been replaced by a lifelong contempt for two stroke motors and wetness that wasn't picturesque and viewable from a nice verandah.

Back at the Indian funboat the captain chose the least appetizing crew member and sent him overboard with a knife and a sprinkling of saffron garnish. Soon we were chugging back to the Lake Palace with a well satisfied Gibbo grinning in the back. We slept like kings in our enormous room, having drunk like them prior to unconsciousness.

Tuesday March 6

We reluctantly check out of the Lake Palace and return to shore to be met by a genuinely sad Ramesh. We say our farewells at the airport and leave him a well earned tip that should ensure his children go to medical school (and if they did, they're probably working in Sydney right now). Udaipur airport was not flash or fancy but it did take security seriously. While we stood at the Customs table an officer rifled through the belongings in our luggage. In Gibbo's carry-on bag he found a Walkman. Curious, he asked for a demonstration so Gibbo popped the earphones onto his head and pressed 'Play'. The officer did a little hop backwards and his eyes lit up as he began to sway to the naughty western type rock music. Very loudly (as you do when wearing headphones) he called out to his fellow highly trained centurions:" Elton John...Elton John". At the end of the song he then went through my bag, handed back the Walkman and cleared us with the official statement:" Thank you. You have very many nice things". He was of course, correct.

Our Indian Airlines flight takes us to Bombay so we can pick up the Qantas service home. As we leave the domestic terminal for the short trip to International we are attacked by the massed forces of the Bombay Vampire and Zombie Taxi union, the members of which do the image of peace loving vegetarians no good whatsoever. A hand grabs my sleeve and pulls me to a waiting taxi, leaving parts of my shirt and skin samples in the grasp of a helpful co-worker. We are pushed into the back of the cab by a swarthy type who flings a young boy in the front seat and then disappears into the maelstrom of circling buzzard-

people. Our driver appears to be ten or maybe even eleven. He speaks no English, is terrified and has never driven in his life...at last, the real India. We explain the need to reach the International terminal intact and he seems to understand right up until the moment the purpose of the clutch pedal eludes him. The gears grind and crunch like a masticating dinosaur and we make nil progress. By now the boy is panic stricken but has managed to perfect the kangaroo hop each time he almost lets out the clutch. For spring in Bombay he's worked up quite a sweat and his little screams with every crunch are as relaxing as yoga on stilts. We are now about 100 metres from our starting point and I can see the signs to the International terminal, so when we lurch to a stop yet again I take his place in the driver's seat and put him next to me. He panics because it his uncle's cab but I hear no complaints from the suffering parts of the vehicle, many of which have taken on that fine aroma of smouldering disaster. When we pull up at International we switch seats and Gibbo and I leave him an extra tip, which while not of medical school generosity, might at least enable him to have his uncle beaten within an inch of his life.

Our bags and tickets are checked by a computer system that seems to work using mostly electricity and we proceed through the brand new metal detector portal into our flight lounge. We are both impressed and relieved by this high level of security, until the lunch whistle blows and our two presiding officials switch off the gate to toddle away for a McKorma and fries. During this period the lounge fills up with many gentlemen we can only assume are auditioning for the role of 'obvious lunatic bomber' on



the inflight movie. Snidely Whiplash, Boris Badenov, Dudley Nightshade; they were all there ticking away, dressed in black and free to do their evil work behind sunglasses so dark they could barely set their timers. It's nice to know that when we travel, even though the comforts of home remain far behind, our paranoias are always with us to keep us company. The flight home was quite pleasant and without incident except for several near minces with a flight attendant.

As a destination, India is one of those places that is much better processed in retrospect. It is vast, romantic, disgusting, unfathomable, breathtaking, inspiring, confusing and indomitable. Would I go back? No. Would I advise you to go? Most definitely. There are 1.4 billion people yearning to welcome you and they'll all be waiting at the airport with their uncles' cabs, keen to change the colour of your unsuspecting Western trousers.