

Touching Down In Mumbai

Passing through the opaque swinging doors of the passport control holding area as arriving passengers our first vision was usually a human wall, joyous family members greeting loved ones. Eyes wide with anticipation and excitement the greeters were largely unaware of the presence of other human beings, carelessly waving, hugging, clutching and scrambling to help with luggage of all sizes and descriptions. The crowd became immersed in anxious conversations, while the arriving party made sure to greet each individual in the receiving party. Most passengers were absorbed by the first wave that began to disperse in a matter of minutes. What was left, the remaining few, were the foreign tourists and an over-supply of second wave participants, consisting of porters, taxi drivers, hotel skills and purveyors of tour packages. We usually tried to have any meaningful conversation with each other before that point. After Turkey and especially Egypt, we had developed the knack for being able to carry on a conversation while the swarm of human flies buzzed around our heads, eager to wrest a slice of our consciousness.

Depending on how much sleep the incoming flight had allowed, we were usually more or less prepared for the arrival. We adjusted our watches to Indian time. There is only one time zone in India, and it is five and a half hours ahead of GMT. The 2:30 a.m. departure from Cairo was fairly typical of the budget flights that had been arranged for us by our consolidator back in San Francisco.

On the advice of some experienced friends, we had done very little planning for our stay in India. Taking account of ourselves and our belongings, I found my sense of humor was in reasonable order as we made our way through the crowd in search of an ATM and a taxi to take us into the center of Mumbai. As a matter of conscious planning, we ordinarily did not have much in the way of spending cash when we arrived in a new country. I had only a few Egyptian dollars left, but the Lets-Make-a-Deal business attitude of airport vendors can be counted upon to enhance creativity.

No ATM was located at the arrival terminal, but one was reported to be outside the terminal somewhere. I negotiated a taxi ride to the city at one of the government sanctioned windows, paid for partly with my few remaining Egyptian dollars and a promise to get some Indian rupees at the first available ATM. It was all very acceptable and very orderly. The driver who was ultimately responsible for the final outcome was visibly anxious about getting the rest of the fare. We stopped at an ATM and he relaxed when I returned with the remaining amount. Meantime, the four of us were rather groggy, and I don't remember much of the ride into Mumbai, only that it was very crowded, and extremely poor people seemed to outnumber any other demographic segment. It would be fair to say that in the U.S. we do not have people of the same level of poverty that exists in many countries.

True to form, the taxi driver, upon seeing the district in which we had chosen to stay, the Colaba district, and taking account of our paging through a travel book, began to offer his services to find an acceptable hotel. We had, in fact, already made a reservation. When the driver finally located it we found it

had already been let. Traffic from the airport had been fairly slow, and we had apparently missed the appointed time slot.

The sun was steadily climbing, and the humid atmosphere was filled with a mixture of over-ripe vegetable matter and diesel exhaust. Carla and I hiked up two flights of narrow steps to a second floor hotel, using the term hotel rather loosely. The not-so-tidy concierge in his not-so-clean tank top and shorts said they had a room, actually more of a stall, actually partitions that did not quite reach the ceiling and were made of something only slightly more substantial than cardboard. We took one look and decided to keep on searching.

After a couple of more stops, we ended up in a reasonable place within two blocks of the India's Gate monument and tourist boat dock. By this time we were all running short on energy, and the abbreviated night's sleep was beginning to take its toll on our decision-making ability. With more thorough research we could have found a place better situated, but we were all growing tired of big cities. A population of somewhere over 13 million put Mumbai comfortably in that category. Figuring to spend only a couple of days in Mumbai, we expected to make some travel plans, then set out to see the country.

Lesley and Andrea headed straight for the beds fully clothed and were asleep in seconds. While they were napping, Carla and I stepped out to get the lay of the land in the immediate neighborhood. We located an internet shop for future reference and picked up a couple bottles of water. Clearly we had landed in the heart of the budget tourist district, budget being the key word. Ordinarily we stayed away from the haunts of large numbers of foreign tourists, but my resolve began to falter with the allure of a familiar tasting breakfast. Down the street was Leopold's, a western tourist icon. We were happy to get the Indian equivalent of an English breakfast and some pretty passable coffee. Dark and cool, ceiling fans slowly stirred the air. At small round tables couples young and old thumbed through travel books and brochures, the atmosphere was irresistible. Many like us, I expect, were also getting their first exposure to India. Having been on the road for going-on eight months, and with an estimated 19,700 miles behind us, we began to feel ourselves worthy travelers.

Europe had allowed us to make incremental cultural steps. Istanbul stretched our awareness; market places were more crowded, and the offerings more eastern and exotic. Egypt, while in Muslim North Africa, retained the common thread of history and culture that ran through the countries of the Mediterranean. But India, except for colonial influences, was a world apart.

Travel books were not long on flattery for Mumbai, but we didn't see enough of it to form a valid opinion. In retrospect it was pretty consistent with what one expects from a city of thirteen million inhabitants in one of the world's most populated countries. We spent a couple of days walking the environs around the Colaba tourist district near the India's Gate monument, making some arrangements and checking email.

Mumbai was, however, a reasonable introduction to the basics of India. Like much of India, Mumbai is a melting pot of cultures and was at first a cluster of seven islands used as a port by Portuguese traders in the early part of the Sixteenth Century. The name Bombay is an English adaptation of Portuguese

for “good bay.” It has a colorful history and complex social fabric that bears the influences of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and a significant contingent of Zoroastrians. Zoroastrians migrated from their home in Persia, pushed there by a wave of Islam in the early Tenth Century. These Persian immigrants came to be known as the Parsi and formed an enterprising middle class of craftsmen, merchants and traders that give Mumbai much of its vitality.

Sidewalks or footpaths, as they are referred to, have an interesting collection of street vendors. My one pair of shoes, which I had hoped would last the duration of the trip, was beginning to show serious signs of wear, some of the stitching was coming undone. Sitting on a knobby root that had erupted through the slabs of cracked concrete was a man with an odd collection of rusty shears, needles, thread and scraps of leather. One of several dozen street side professionals, his occupation had earned him the title of “mochi.” Wearing what was hardly more than a few rags, his eyes followed mine to the whitish patch on my left shoe, evidence of my socked foot showing through.

“What the heck!” I thought; “I am determined to make these things last.”

I untied the laces and the road worn veteran of seven and a half months of continuous walking fell to the uneven sidewalk. The shoe repairer politely offered a scrap of cardboard for me to rest my foot on while he worked.

Beneath the gnarled, reaching arms of the ancient shade tree where he had set up shop we stood and watched as his sinewy fingers went about their work. He closed the gap, cut a small piece of leather and sewed it inside for reinforcement. In about five minutes he set my shoe down spread the lace and lifted the tongue. I slid in my foot. He carefully tied my lace, made sure it was snug and reclaimed the scrap of cardboard. Looking up expectantly our eyes met, I nodded my approval and asked how much. He said ten rupees and held up ten boney fingers for clarification. Only twenty four hours with the new currency, I made the quick conversion in my head and then did a recheck. About twenty-one cents I reckoned. Feeling quite satisfied with the job and pleased that I would get a few more miles before I had to buy another pair, I gave him fifty. He looked down at the coins, his eyes brightened and appeared absolutely elated. I waved off his gesture to return some of what I had given him. I hated to wreck the local economy by unduly inflating the wage base, but it was certainly worth a buck to me.

Because he worked with leather, not considered by Hindu custom to be clean, it is likely that he was a man of what was previously the untouchable caste. Many menial tasks can be dealt with along the sidewalk. Looking down from our hotel room window one morning, I observed another sidewalk service provider, the Khan-Saf-Walla. For a small price he would remove any excess wax from your ears, while you wait. Everyone has to make a living, but I was never tempted to pay him a visit.