



Stories of India Three authors.

chai und chai und chai

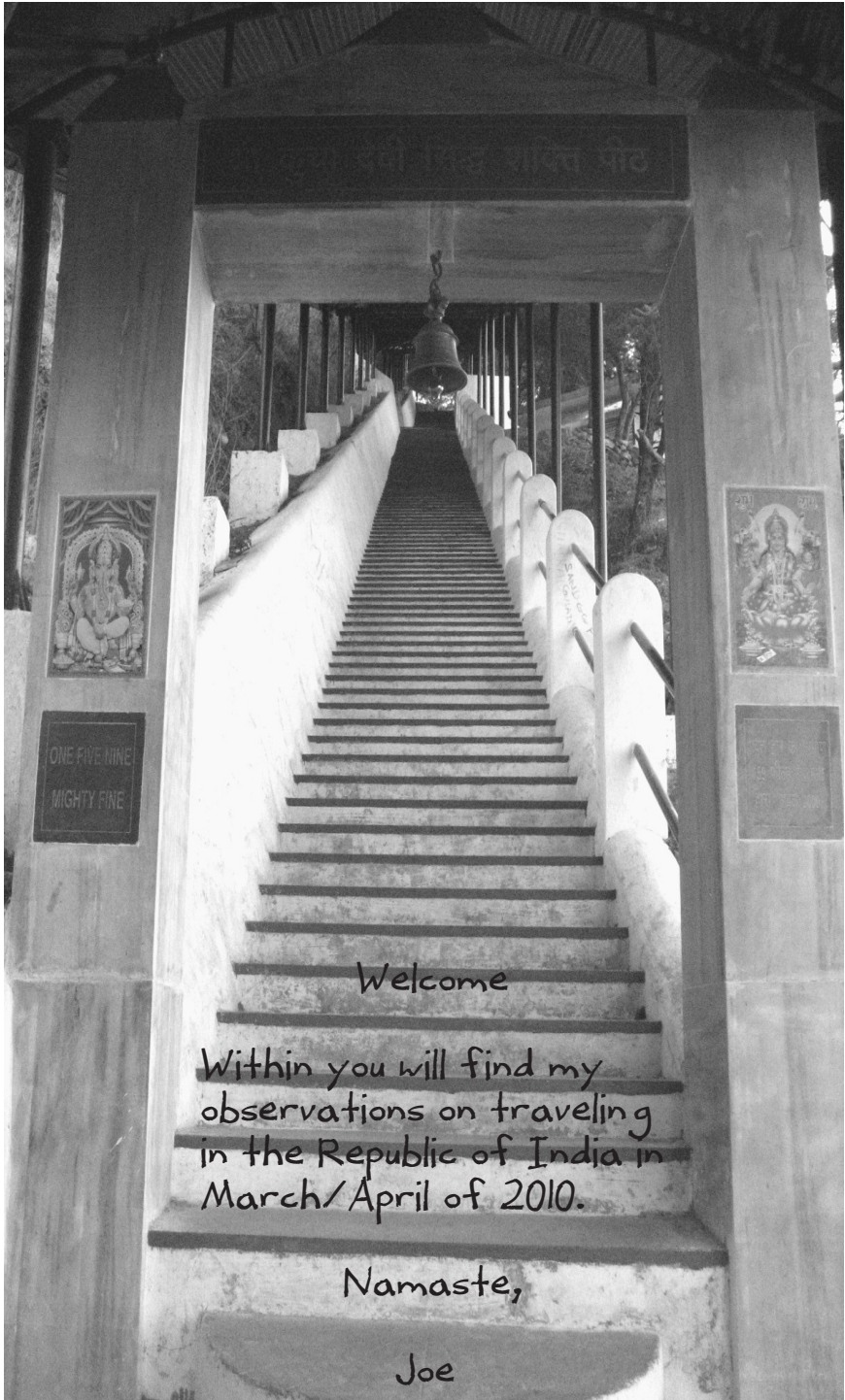
by
Joe
Scott
Ryan



This 'zine contains three separate accounts of a trip to India that we took together in March/April 2010. We hope you find it interesting, entertaining, and not too repetitive.



made in portland, or, and in india (obviously). summer 2010.



ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय



ONE FIVE NINE
MIGHTY FINE



ONE FIVE NINE
MIGHTY FINE

Welcome

Within you will find my
observations on traveling
in the Republic of India in
March/April of 2010.

Namaste,

Joe



When I was a wee lad I would go to multi-cultural dance programs my mom organized at the middle school where she taught ESL. The golden threaded saris and head swiveling motions were otherworldly and the music was mesmerizing. The immigrant families would have a fundraiser before the dance show, selling foods from their different cultures and of course the Indian sweets were killer. In high school I was introduced to vegetarian curries, bha ji and Ravi Shankar. So, India has always been very high on my list of countries to visit. I imagined a lush tropical land filled with smooth skinned, polite and nicely dressed people who smelled of temple incense and treated animals with deep respect (well I didn't really expect that, but it was the dream). Of course I realized India is basically a third world country, still reeling from struggling in a post-colonial mode but I wasn't prepared for the challenges we were to face.



Scott casually invited me on his two week trip to India for the Kumbh Mela (a Hindu pilgrimage to the holy Ganges River in Northern India that only happens every 11 years) a few years ago and I didn't think much about it since I don't even plan my life two weeks ahead. When the time drew more nigh I researched the Mela and watched a film called "Short Cut to Nirvana" about it. The film made it look insanely crowded, schmaltzy, hypocritical and hot. It looked like Burning Man but with ditches instead of porta-potties and women with long skirts and covered heads instead of faux fur and body paint. I didn't think I would want to go to the most populated event in the history of the planet in face melting 100 degree heat (sometimes up to 40 million people at one time). I had also been hearing about a friend of a friend who was at the Mela and how he had his camera broken being crushed in the crowds there, as well as contracting hallucination-inducing heat stroke and then getting a stomach bug while he was recovering from the heat stroke. But I was ready for an adventure, so eventually I signed up for 2 weeks in India with Scott and Ryan (two trustworthy, witty and capable traveling mates).



I had my reservations about being a tourist in an underdeveloped country. I had told myself that I wouldn't be a tourist again without doing some volunteer work while in an underdeveloped country, but this trip was only 2 weeks and I didn't think there would be time. Last time I traveled to Mexico was to play in the ocean at my friend's dad's beach house and I was completely destroyed emotionally by the border crossing. The Tijuana destitute (babies at their hip) struggle to beg in the heat and car exhaust. But I felt I could mitigate my guilt in India by traveling responsibly and giving money to people. Really I just couldn't turn down an opportunity to travel with my best friends to a place I always wanted to go. I still had a lot of fears about traveling across the world. Fear of strange sicknesses, fear of my cat or my grandparents dying while I was gone. I wanted to say yes. So often I say no to things that I find challenging. I did end up getting some vaccines before going since I believe an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

We hastily made plans for trains and a hotel after we realized that we were leaving in less than two weeks. Ryan wanted to surf in Goa so I planned a train route with a midway stop in the middle of India in a little town near an UNESCO World Heritage Site (Ajanta Caves). Then we would head back north to Haridwar for the Kumbh Mela. I wanted to avoid overly tourist places like the Taj Mahal. Also I prefer South Indian food, climate and culture so I wanted to make it as far south as possible. My companions, being freewheeling agents of fortune, agreed with the blueprints.

We boarded our Delta flight from PDX for Amsterdam. Schipol airport was a unexpectedly crappy. The seats were uncomfortable, there were no public power outlets and the internet was really expensive. They had a secondary security checkpoint at the gate to board the plane and they confiscated the \$10 water bottles people bought at the airport. I was in the middle of a middle row for the 8 hr flight to Delhi feeling very cramped. We arrived in Delhi in the middle of the night and got a hotel pickup to the Ajanta Hotel in Pahar Ganj, the heart of the seedy part of Delhi. Pahar Ganj is loaded with tourist hotels and market stalls filled with knock-off clothes and junk. Of course the room we booked was mysteriously not available so they downgraded us and one of us had to sleep on a cot. Our body clocks were completely reversed now and so sleeping was difficult for me.

I woke up early and lay anxiously in the bed for a few hours while Scott watched Venture Brothers on his Ipod; Ryan was sleeping like a log after taking some Melatonin. I did some yoga stretches since my legs were really tight from a solid day of travel.

This photo is actually from one of our last days in India. We were all tuckered out.



When Ryan woke we went to the lobby and got a ton of money changed, had continental style breakfast in the hotel restaurant (of course the rooftop restaurant promoted on the web was not open), and booked a tour around the city with the hotel for a shared car for the 3 of us. We set out with some sight-seeing in mind. Our driver was a small Nepali man who set the standard for our experiences with the tourist industry in India: smiles and accommodating statements but little tricks and traps everywhere. He was a typical commissioned tout. I felt really duped since I thought I was over getting "taken for a ride" because I had done the whole company shop thing in Thailand and learned quickly how to avoid it. Our guide didn't want to take us to places we requested because he said it was too hot and crowded in those places. We would tell him where we wanted to go and he would tell us where he was going to take us instead. He liked to point out things like the park with the big Buddha statue where hundreds of people go each night to have sex with prostitutes. Looking back I think he might have subtly been offering his services as a pimp. He also probably pulled a mild scam on us.

A while after we got back from our long tour of the city we get a knock at the hotel door and it's the driver with Scott's sun glasses in his hand saying that Scott left them in the car. Upon Scott's reflection the driver most likely took them out of his bag when we were out walking around some temple knowing that we would tip him for returning them (which we did). The terrible thing was that because there were so many scammers it was so hard to tell if someone was being helpful or trying to rip us off. It made us all paranoid and distrustful after only a few days in country. Advice for travelers: avoid Delhi.

Delhi is a shithole. There I said it. You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy (jk). I feel really terrible that people have to live in cities like Delhi. The smog was terrible, the roads were torn up, the people were rude and the stray dogs were starving and wounded from getting hit by cars and motorcycles. I expected seediness, fakirs, and con artists but it was just filthy, corrupt and full of touts. It didn't feel like one of those ancient Asian cities where new development nestles into overgrown ruins and ancient walls. Everything seemed like it was from the 1970's. We had high hopes that outside of Delhi we would find a more welcoming environment.



squat break

My life never felt in danger but things definitely got physically uncomfortable. Discomfort is a key word here. I often felt uncomfortable for traveling around when people and animals were barely alive around me. I knew what I was getting into with the crushing poverty but there were other unpleasant surprises around every corner. For example, the caste system was in full effect. I thought that had gone out of style with British Rule. I don't know why I didn't expect this but racism, sexism, jingoism, and religious intolerance were in full force. I never felt like I could do anything tangible to help the people suffering around me which made it that much more brutal.



Taking another high speed tuk tuk ride. This lunatic driver liked to comment on women's privates and sing to us.



Delhi was dusty and dirty and smelled of feces. It seemed like most of the Western tourists were too scared to travel far from one little street of Pahar Ganj where there were alleys of bazaars. The bazaars all sold the same tourist crap with knock-off designer bags and Hindu trinkets and saris and shirts. In one really hidden back alley Scott found a truly unique artisan selling handpainted t-shirts of his own design (Mohinder Singh). Here is me modeling the shirt.



It's a super tight Reebok tank and the ox is saying "SMILE ALOT COST NOTHING"

Well, we finally got the f out of Delhi by catching a train heading south for Bhusaval. We were in 3rd class air conditioned which wasn't so bad except for the family of 6 who sat across from us in a space for 3 people. We are 3 tall dudes with long legs and it was once a gain uncomfortable to be so jammed in. After some hours of our 9 hour ride I started talking to the Aunty who was the head of this family unit. She was a nurse from Puna and her English was pretty good. Side note: Lots of people would act like they didn't know English but then when they loosened up they would speak to us. She offered us some of her thali, making plates for us with curry, chapati, a huge pickled thing and julabi. This was our first real taste of homemade Indian food and it was good. I consciously ate a bite of julabi even though I knew it had milk in it. It was yummy. Another side note: it was really easy for me to eat vegan even though I probably had ghee unintentionally a few times. The Aunty was really nice but her little nephews had no boundaries; they crawled all over Scott and were loud. Scott struggled to keep his cool and succeeded even though I knew he was having a bad time. I admired his dedication to allowing himself to be challenged; I tend to escape from hard situations anyway I can.

We made it to Bhusaval which was a dry and dusty backwater town thrown up around the train station in an area known for growing bananas. Here is where my planning started to fall apart. After some hard haggling we got a jeep to take us to Jalgoan, a closer town to the Ajanta Caves. But of course the Caves are closed on Mondays so we were in this place that tourists only go to for this one thing and the one thing was closed. It wasn't terrible though. Ryan got a haircut for 50 cents and we stayed in an all-white painted hotel run by a truly

helpful man. I did find a bed bug on me there and that was gross.



motorbikes in Jalgoan

Anyway, we missed the caves and went back to the train station the next day. We waited some hours for our train to Goa and when it was due to arrive we went to the track where it was supposed to pull up. A different train approached and we watched our train number disappear from the electronic board. We were confused but thought that our train was probably just late or something. When we went to ask someone where our train was they told us it just left a minute ago on the track right behind us. We were stuck in Nowheresville. I think we all felt an equal share in the responsibility for this EPIC FAIL.

Our options for further travel were very limited. The trains needed to be booked at least a month in advance. We thought we might need to just get ourselves to Mumbai by standing room only train or bus.

As we debated in the station a group of taxi-wallahs and touts had surrounded us and were trying to get us to let them take us places. Finally Ryan noticed one young man stepped up to us and told us not to listen to the these guys who were saying they would help us. He walked us over to the ticket counter and helped us buy a ticket for Mumbai that night. We were wary of his assistance but he seemed genuinely nice and his English was much better than everyone else's so we could understand what he was trying to do. His name was Rahul, he was 18 and he offered to take us to his house for food. We embraced the fact that we might be getting into another rip-off mess but I had a gut feeling he was a solid guy who was just curious about what these amateur white guys where doing in his little town.

Rahul took us to his aunt's house where the women of his family were on the roof preparing popod (yummy salty dough things that tasted like cheese puffs) for the Hanuman (monkey god) holiday that day. They lived behind a temple and Rahul took us there to meet the priest and his neighbors. A group of kids surrounded us and we tried to impress them with our digital pictures and dollar bills. One of the kids had a Michael Jackson shirt on and was obsessed with American weight lifters; he showed us videos of them on his PS3-like device. There were a bunch of cute puppies and it was pretty cool just hanging out with these people who had never even seen Westerners before (according to Rahul). They seemed to be middle class and to have chill lives living back on these labyrinthine dirt roads. compared to other families. They were really proud of their state of Maharashtra and they spoke Marathi and Hindi. Rahul offered to take us to the Ajanta Caves in his dad's car. We were stoked and

his dad pulled up in a little volvo looking 4 door car. His dad was a quiet no-nonsense ex-military guy who didn't know much English. The caves were kind of far and it was 100 degrees so it was really a big solid favor they did for us.

The caves were Buddhist monasteries cut out of sheer rock cliffs, some as old as 1st century BCE. It was a very serene place and inside the caves was a refuge from the heat. The huge Buddhas were cool and the frescos were really ancient but the heat made the hiking around exhausting. Rahul and his dad looked bored as hell too. We left but not before all 3 of us got separately ripped off by the exit gift shops selling little trinkets. We all bought the same type of little elephant and cup thing from 3 equally pushy salesmen. Rahul and his dad seemed confused and embarrassed for us since our souvenirs were only worth like a dollar and we paid much more than that.

We ate at a really dingy roadside cafe that was tasty with locals who were kind of shocked to see some nerdy white dudes. Rahul's dad insisted on treating us and kept ordering us more chapati every 5 minutes. We got back to Bhusaval and spent some



awkward moments with Rahul's mom, dad and sister watching Rahul's dad's DVDs



of his wedding videography (his job). The brides looked like they were 14 year old girls who were terrified and the grooms were gross 50 year old men with creepy stares. Rahul's dad's video editing effects were awesome though; lots of keyhole wipes and psychedelic transitions that lasted longer than the scenes. Finally we were driven through Bhusaval to the train station on a truly epic (relatively) high speed ride through the most narrow side streets where we would miss hitting toddlers, chickens, buildings, scooters, dogs and the elderly by millimeters. One of the highlights of that ride was the canal of sewage that flowed through the town. Rahul somehow got us onto a 2nd class AC and we regrettably said goodbye to the nicest dude in India. He really saved our butts in a time when we felt lost and frustrated.



The 2nd class AC train car is highly recommended. Our bunk neighbor across the aisle was a sharply dressed Sikh with full beard and turban (naturally for a Sikh) who was a Captain of something, maybe in the army. He spoke the Queen's English and was super helpful about answering our questions about Mumbai. I would have liked to have spoken to him more but we needed to sleep only to wake up at 4am to disembark with hundreds of other people in Mumbai (Bombay). The air was thick and jungly; the

city looked intriguing with lots of strung up colored lights but we had decided to dramatically change our plans and fly to the beachy state of Kerala in the farthest southwest to change things up and try to catch some waves. Here is where we truly were treated to an impressive, if somewhat unsophisticated, scam.

Immediately after disembarking from the train this guy started following us and asking us if we needed a ride. We tell him no but he kept tailing us as we walked toward the station exit. We stopped and deliberated on our plans with Indian families sleeping on the train station floor all around us waiting for their trains. The friendly taxi driver kept trying to help us and talk to us and we were just so tired. Finally I just gave in and agreed to have him take us to the airport. The Captain had told us how much it should cost to taxi to the airport and also that the taxis use meters so we shouldn't have a problem getting ripped off.

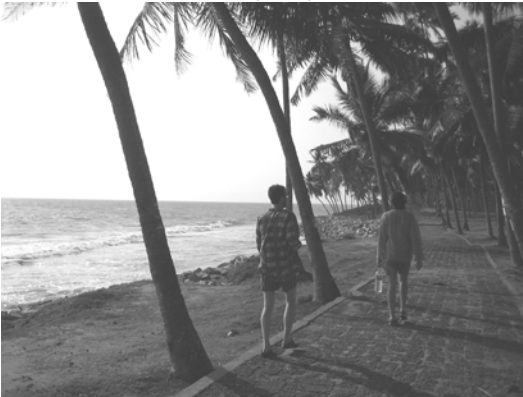
However I should have stuck to my rules and not taken the first taxi guy who approached us. The taxi-wallah showed us the rate board on the train station and told us he always used the meter. We got into his old-fashioned yellow cab and he told us about how much it would cost to the airport. He had a buddy with him and the buddy ended up driving while the guy kept chatting with us. He asked us for our names and he thought Scott said Skype, so he went with it. I had seen on a map that the airport was fairly close to the train and so when why we were going the direction we were going he said oh, well look there is a sign there for the airport and he was right, the freeway had signs saying we were heading toward the airport. However, I think he drove around the long way. When we were very close to the airport the cab stopped and the guy tells us his

friend needs to get out here to catch a bus to his house and he would drive us the rest of the way... but we needed to pay him now. I knew here that we were basically being held hostage when he asked for way more money than it was supposedly to be. We were in a sketchy looking neighborhood at 4am with no real sense of how to walk to the airport. He told us there was a separate charge for the night fee. I told him he was not a nice person to charge us so much money but begrudgingly we were going to pay because we were tired and just wanted to get somewhere we could relax. Scott and Ryan pulled out 1000 rupee notes and handed them to the guy's friend. Magically they became 100 rupee bills and the guy said that we only handed him 100's. All the bills in India have Gandhi on them so Ryan and Scott thought for a second it was possible they underpaid. Really it was just cheap sleight of hand and R and S knew it. We were so fed up with this routine we told them we weren't going to pay anymore until we were at the airport. The guy drove us up the airport and was asking us for more money. When he stopped we got out and just took off. He was still asking us to pay him more but a security guard came over and he drove off. The only thing we did right was kept our bags in our laps instead of in the trunk, so we could get out and just take off. I felt like shit for getting so scammed but looking back on it now it feels funny to have that badge of honor of getting so suckered in Mumbai.



So anyway, we forked over some serious dough (in Indian terms) to fly to Trivandrum (real name of the city is Thiruvananthapuram) in the communist state of Kerala. Interestingly enough Kerala is the most successful and literate and supposedly cleanest state out of India's 28 states. The taxi to our beach hotel in Varkala was prepaid (no haggling necessary) and was a spiffy 1960's white cab like something Elvis would ride in with a police escort.

Varkala was Euro New Age paradise with Ayurveda everything and yoga classes in every hotel. The local Malayalis were polite and laid back and the men wore colorful sarongs. This was really a highlight of the trip in terms of relaxation as we got to boogie board (no surfing waves) in the Arabian Sea and be away from the constant honking of horns and masses of people.



There were tons of Tibetan exiles with restaurants and handicraft shops. It was almost impossible to find real Indian food so we ate strange versions of pizza and European food. I had some good Tibetan momo there though. It was in a Tibetan Euro restaurant where I overheard a conversation which encapsulated the yoga tourist psyche. A 40-ish French man with full beard is sitting with a 20 something American woman.

They were talking about yoga and she said in sugary tone, "That is why yoga is so amazing; it makes the impossible possible." Ryan, Scott and I all chuckled to ourselves at that one. A few minutes later the dude said, "I dreamt of you last night before we even met. I think it is fate that we are both here." He was so obvious and cliché in his attempt to downward dog his way into her pants it was hilarious. She didn't like that line though because she quickly excused herself and curtly said it was nice to meet him and then bolted.



Ryan really likes tea. Actually it's beer on the DL from the cops.

Our last day in this little tourist enclave was where I ashamedly lost my cool and I would like to apologize here to Scott for being an ass. I got upset over a trivial detail of our laundry not being done because I thought we were going to miss our chance to take a houseboat through the backwaters of Kerala. Sorry, Scott and Ryan, I am embarrassed by my behavior that day.

But we did make it to a traditional thatched roofed boat on the backwaters of the jungle where we saw some cool stuff. We were gondola-ed through canals of a fishing village on Monroe Island where

little boys would run up to us and oddly ask us for "one pen." They really wanted pens for some reason. Unfortunately we had none to give them. I saw the only pet dogs we had seen in India. We had the most delicious and colorful South Indian meal on the boat.



But it was not all fun times on this houseboat. The swelteringly humid and mosquito-filled night came upon us as we drank Officer's Choice whiskey and played cards. We retired to the cabin to find that the AC did not work and Scott had accidentally broken the fan earlier.



We were forced to open the windows to the mozzie-filled night with no breeze and we all felt as if we were being tortured as we couldn't sleep. My mattress pad on the hard floor was squishy and hot as it was utterly soaked by my sweat. Scott had the worst time of it as he had a cold and he didn't sleep at all. I also forgot to mention that he had just had his wisdom teeth removed right before the trip so his mouth was feeling weird too. The next morning we could not wait to get off this boat that had become a jail for us. The moment the boat docked we hopped off and got out there before the captain had time to notice his crappy fan was broken since we figured he would try to finagle more money out of us and we had already paid a pretty penny for the boat ride even by Western standards. We still had a jam packed standing train ride to Trivandrum before we could find a hotel and rest. How sweet that air-conditioned Princess Inn was with tv and a shower when we finally arrived.

The hard parts and the journey as a whole made me radically appreciate the privileged luxurious life I lead in America. Everything seems easy here now. That is probably the biggest benefit I received from India. Being reminded and humbled by how much of the world lives hand-to-mouth. The poverty and Untouchable beggars there made the destitute in America seem like yuppies in comparison (this is an unfair analogy but I have never seen true starvation in America).

For our last leg we flew back north to Delhi and tried our hardest to get out of there as fast as we could for Rishikesh and the Kumbh Mela but of course getting out of Delhi involved deception and runaround. We ended up waiting in the scariest and nastiest bus station I have ever seen for like 6 hours only to find out that there was no such thing as an

AC bus to Haridwar or Rishikesh. Our last great trial involved this overnight humid bus ride through an endless highway of exhaust-spewing traffic and potholes crammed into the back of a soiled bus where we couldn't move our legs for 8 hours. I considered this a form of yoga, basically having to keep my body in one strained position for the whole ride. We arrived in the breezy mountain Hindu town of Rishikesh at 5 am and mindlessly wandered the monkey and cow filled streets waiting for a hotel to open to rest our weary heads.



Rishikesh was fascinating in that it is a major Hindu pilgrimage site and also where the Beatles came to stay with the Maharishi before they became disenchanted with his womanizing. It is the home of modern yoga and sits on the pale blue Ganges River where it feeds out of the Himalayas. The pilgrims would ritually bathe and throw devotions of grains into the river but I saw some of the same people throwing their water bottles and trash into the river minutes later.



The monkeys of Rishikesh came in two varieties. Brown-faced which would hiss and try to bite you and grey with black faces who were cute, serene and monk-like. In the chilly mornings locals would feed the monkeys and cows the day old chapatis and the monkeys would come swinging down on the jerry-rigged electrical lines to steal from the cows.



We took a "trek" for a sunrise trip to a small mountain-top temple looking toward the Himalayas and hiked straight down cow trails and culverts through a rural village down to a small waterfall. It was not that impressive of scenery and it was tricky to find footing on loose rocks going down steep inclines. Our guide was a silent teen-aged village kid who hiked it in flip flops with the footing of a mountain goat. On this downward hike we did meet two pleasant men in professional attire climbing up the rock steps of the

of the mountain. They were teachers at the high school which was at the top of the mountain and everyday they hiked more than an hour up this crazy elevation to teach English and Math. The English teacher wanted to practice his English and also tell us that we should pray at the little shrines that were everywhere on the path. That we could just ask for blessings and make wishes of the gods.

We saved the Kumbh Mela in Haridwar for our penultimate day and I was kind of scared about what millions of people trying to congregate around a river would feel and smell like. Did I mention every town we had been to smelled of human waste? I have a sensitive nose but luckily a strong stomach.



I was pleasantly surprised though as we saw a parade of Naga Sadhus (weird naked yogis, some who worship the Death Goddess of Kali) and colorfully uniformed marching brass bands on tricked out floats. Some bossy guys herded us into an outdoor temple to make us line up for the sunset ritual but we got out of there and found our own place on the river where a teenage Brahmin kid lead us in the ritual to liberate us from the cycle of reincarnation (for a few dollars in rupees). At sun set everyone put out their puja or ritual offering of banana leaves with flowers and incense burning in a little pyre on them

and set them afloat along the river. I bathed in the river and it was blue, cool and refreshing. The priest kid tried to get us to drink the water but while I was okay with affecting the Hindu rites I was not going to drink water from a river used to dispose of the dead and sewage (Sorry Shiva). It was a mellow end to our hectic and misguided pilgrimage. The sun went down and the neon lights started to glow. We were very pleasantly surprised and I felt blissed out a bit. There were probably less than a million people that day and I felt some measure of accomplishment for having pushed my boundaries.



One of Scott's goals was to take a picture with a yogi who looked like Dhalsim from Street Fighter but all the yogis had long hair and beards and oddly seemed more pudgy than the general populace (Dhalsim is bony).

The next morning we took a 9 hour car ride back to the Delhi airport. During take off Scott began barfing into airsick bags. He spent the whole 14 hours back yaking and sweating and feeling terrible. Oh yeah, it was his birthday too. The longest birthday ever since we kept crossing time zones going back in time. I felt so incredibly bad for him. We

had considered spending a few days in Amsterdam on the way back but with Scott's illness that was totally out. I made it through the trip with no real stomach discomfort or illness except for a few hours where I couldn't go far from the bathroom. When we landed in Portland I have never been so in love with a city, my girlfriend, my cat, my bed, etc.



Some miscellaneous observations:

- Not very many people were smiling or would return smiles. It makes sense due to the hard lives so many people were leading; I don't think I would smile at some tourist if they were watching me carry a huge dirty sack of rice on my back onto a crowded train in sweltering heat either.
- 95% of Indian men wear full button down shirts and slacks even in 100 degrees, even when shoveling cow dung. No two shirts are the same.
- Two weeks makes things too fast; there is too big of a learning curve in how not to get ripped off.
- Very few people smoked cigarettes. That was outstanding.
- There were a lot of people but besides waiting in lines and on public transport I never felt my personal space was invaded. Absolutely no respect for the line.
- Hatha (posing) yoga is really only practiced by hardcore yogis and white people.
- When someone ubiquitously says :No problem, Sir: what they really mean is no and I am going to gradually convince you to part with all of your rupees.

Women:

I fully understand that America is not always the best place in the world for women and it's not nearly as egalitarian as most people think but the sexism in India was so overt and disturbing. In the northern lands there just weren't even a lot of women on the streets during the day and a lot of the ones who were had full veils on. I only saw 3 women driving cars and maybe 10 driving scooters. In the south things were better but still the gender divide was huge. This is probably less true in the cosmopolitan places like Mumbai but having seen lots of Indian women in high positions in the US I was surprised by the lack of women in the workforce. Also India had a female prime minister so it was surprising how women were treated. Girls could have their hair short but then about 95% of adult women had long hair, usually covered. Men did lots of gawking and our taxi drivers would often comment on women disparagingly.



Animals:

Being a vegan I was pretty excited to travel to the most vegetarian country on earth. However, the treatment animals received was very sad. Dogs were just traffic problems for most people and locals

would like at me like I was crazy when I wanted to try to pet them or feed them scraps. The cows were revered in a strange way. Some were beaten with big sticks to get them to move and were mostly sickly looking. Oddly I only saw one cat but thankfully he looked like a healthy pet.



Lessons learned:

I should follow my instincts. Research more. Hire a trustworthy local to guide around places where there is a large tourist scam industry. Spend more time in a few places instead of traveling thousands of miles in two weeks. I feel like if I had spent half of the time I have spent on this zine actually researching and planning this trip it would have been much more educational and enjoyable. But the more time goes by, the more I value this trip for what it was.

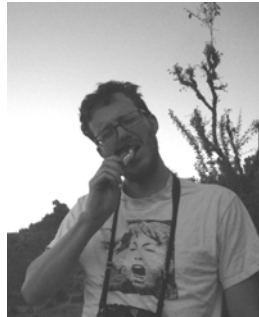
Would I go back to India? Perhaps. If I was asked that while I was there or in the first week back I would have said "no freaking way" but now I feel like there is probably more to see there. I would like to see some wild nature parks and some Jain and Sikh temples. The Hindu temples and mosque ruins we explored all seemed kind of sterile. I like temples and ruins but mostly we saw newer temples. Jainism is fascinating to me since the monks are nudists and take the "do no harm" (AHIMSA) creed to extremes like not inhaling bugs.

The young Sikhs I saw seemed really urban and kind of had a hip hop style. Their turbans and clothes were immaculate and in great solid colors. I would also have liked to go to Bollywood and explore Mumbai more.



So for all my complaining the journey was certainly an adventure where I learned some things about myself. I think if I had a different attitude I might have been able to deal with some of the challenges better but I felt very defensive and rushed. There were some good times and some kind people to balance out all the con artists and ordeals.

My photos aren't the greatest. I am not a big photographer. I like to just snap as a memory aid. Ryan is a great photographer and he brought two cameras so I am thankful to him for that since I enjoy looking at good photos. Scott and Ryan are also really talented writers so I look forward to reading what they had to say about all this madness.



I hope I didn't bore you.

Any questions? suenoverde@gmail.com

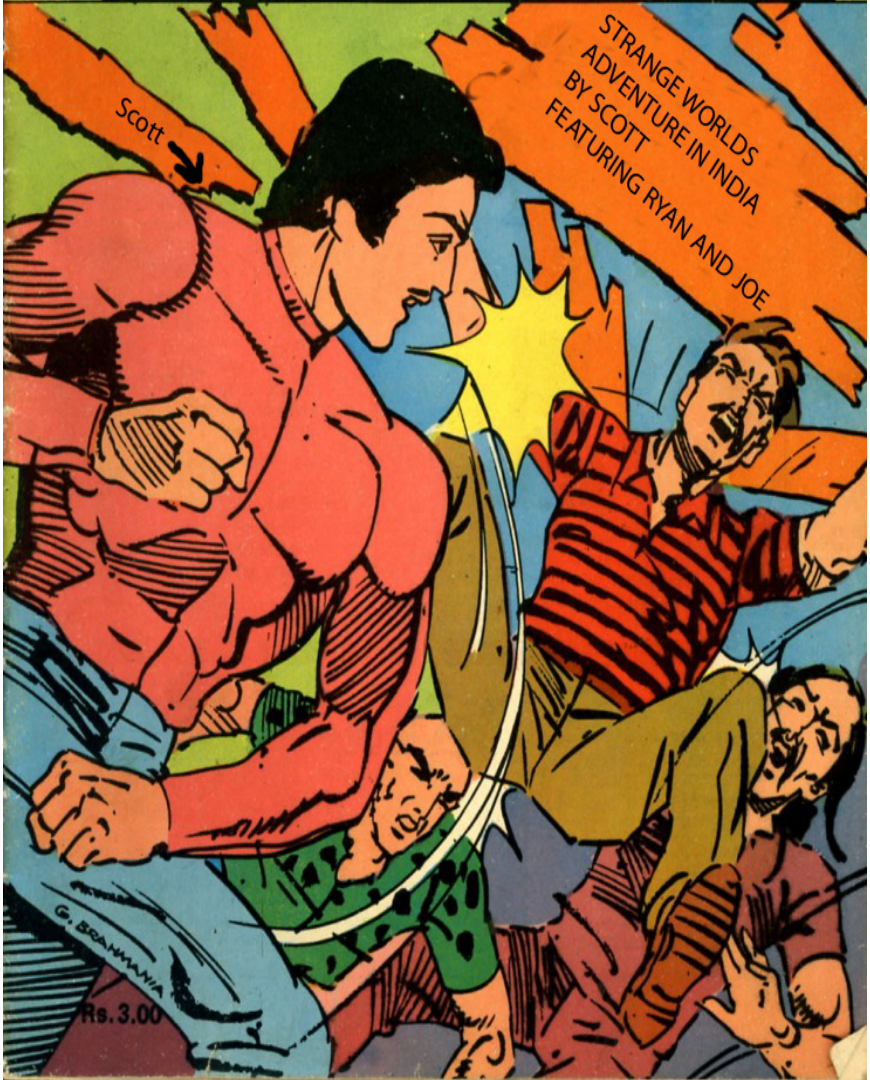
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FEATURING RYAN AND JOE

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Disclaimer (and spoiler): * India is by far the single worst place I have ever been in my entire life. It is an absolutely wretched country. Because of this, I may use some strong/harsh language to describe the land, and its people. What I want you to know though...is that my trip there was an incredibly cool experience that I would gladly do again if given the chance. I may even voluntarily return to this place someday, if the right circumstances presented themselves. So, just know that even though I'm about to complain and use a lot of variations of the word "awful" to describe what the situation over there is...there is no denying that a trip to India is an adventure that anyone who grew up in the Midwest owes it to themselves to experience. *

I'm not sure of the exact trigger that prompted my interest in traveling to India. If I were forced to guess, I would wager it had something to do with Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom. I grew up in a family that treasures things like Disney World vacations (I am actually writing this zine from Orlando Florida...on a return flight from Disney World...seriously). I had a great childhood and stuff, I feel like I was exposed to a lot of really interesting things about the world. This exposure came through a box though, sweet sweet television. And, while I love television...a lot...watching the box kind of put me in a box.

I could see Indy's whip crack at the face of a Kali worshipper from the comfort of my parent's basement, but I could never experience the harsh environmental realities that drove these worshippers to Kali in the first place. I think my own mortality has been catching up with me a lot these days, and it feels like it's time to go out and dare the world to do its worst. Kumbh Mela times in India seemed like it'd be a pretty intense physical challenge...so, why not? My beautiful and sharp witted GF was not up for the journey, but luckily...some of my tightest and most trusted bros were. With dollars in hand, and backpacks on back, we set

out to finish the job that the British had begun many years prior.

March 2010

You KNOW the trip you are about to go ON is going to be really good when it is suggested that you UNDERGO a battery of three SHOTS, AND two regiments of pills IN ORDER to come OUT of it without a horrible disease. Ryan AND I met up ONE day at a hilariously charming travel clinic IN NW Portland. We needed to give our IMMUNE SYSTEMS AN advantage IN the fight AGAINST the UNHOLY diseases INDIA would deploy, hoping to thwart our health. I'M NOT a "shot guy"...I hate them. At the time of the shot, I was OF the mind that there were few things MORE PAINFUL AND MENTALLY traumatizing THAN having a thin piece of metal pierce my veins. Little did I KNOW, this would turn out to be the least painful AND traumatizing event OF the whole INDIA ordeal. There would be MOMENTS during this trip that I would have gladly paid a MAN 5000 rupees to give me these



...still actually excited at the prospect of traveling around in India

shots again if it meant that I could be spirited away from the awful moment du jour that India had served up. The most noteworthy part of this leg of the trip were the options given to us for malaria pills. We were allowed essentially two roads. One, a small number of pills that were said to give you vividly horrible nightmares. Another, a daily pill that was supposed to enhance your sensitivity to the sun. I look back at this moment now and smile...sort of. I actually thought it might be fun/funny to have drug induced nightmares in India. I thought I'd be some sort of dollar store William S Burroughs. Luckily, I went with sun sensitivity. India provided all the waking nightmares I could possibly desire.

March 26th

The big day. We were SO FULL OF hope...the day, full OF PROMISE. I like air travel, it's NOT really a thing for me. I COMPLAIN SOME-TIMES because I'M pretty tall, and DON'T get a lot of leg ROOM. But flights are FINE, whatever. I guess the ONLY NOTABLE SCENARIO of this flight was the SECOND part. I was seated at the aisle in a row with two German ladies. Throughout the course of our trip, they each got up to go the bathroom SEVEN (7) TIMES, each, IN staggered occasions. I counted. WHO has to go to the bathroom 7 times over the course of 8 hours? If my German was better than it is, I would have suggested that maybe they get checked out for diabetes or something. I have a COOL special



This is a deceptively calm depiction of Delhi streets. They are actually filled with dying men, women, and dogs.

MOVE that ALLOWS me to NOT have to go to the bathroom for a really LONG time. I'M NOT SURE what the MOVE IS...but, I employ it a lot...SO, I tend to NOTICE when people excuse themselves to go to the bathroom.

We arrived in New Delhi at night time. AS SOON as you exit the CONFINES of the airport, the country SLAPS you in the face with the reality that YOU have just paid to be a part of. Not 30 MINUTES after landing, SOMEONE attempted to short change Joe ON SOME waters...we saw a guy with NO legs...and we had inhaled a salt shaker full of dust. I feel like at this point in the story I should pause to give you a few thoughts ON My (admittedly short-sighted) perspective of the type of traveler that I am. Please join me for that in the next paragraph.

I DON'T consider myself a froofy traveler, at all. My father has imparted UPON me the excellent quality of "SUCKING it up". I feel like I get myself through sub-

optimal situations with minimal spazzing out simply by repeating the mantra "suck it up" over and over in my head. I also don't consider myself a road trip complainer. When I travel, I do so with a heavy backpack, and I stay in hostels. I also tend to travel just for the experience of being in another place. I don't show up with a long list of things to do, so it's easy to roll with whatever ends up showing itself along the way. I guess just try and take my word for that while you are reading the rest of this...because I'm about to do a lot of travel-centric complaining.

OK, so, we started seeing what India was all about...and, I'll admit, at first it was exciting. Not to bring up Harrison Ford again, but it really was like being in some sort of awesome adventure movie that I would instantly watch. We got into a taxi, and were treated to a Mister Toad's Wild Ride (RIP) of thrills. Things were still novel at this point, things were fun. This night, we stayed in the only hotel that we had booked in advance. Joe

took care of this...he would eventually take care of MOST aspects of this trip. When we arrived at the hotel, we were welcomed with what we would later come to realize as a classic Indian con...the switcharoo. The room that we had booked, in advance, was suddenly unavailable. We were offered more Spartan accommodations at a slight discount. An innocuous



change in plan, but a move that would eventually come to define our expectations for what India actually had for us, versus what it said it had for us.

We awoke to a five dollar breakfast, the most expensive breakfast we would have in India. Here's my jam about traveling and being a tourist and stuff. I expect to pay more for things,

.and I DON't mind. Seriously, I'M NOT just saying that. IN India though, there is a game that you MUST play with people if you DON't want to pay 200-500% of what SOMETHING actually costs. So, it's NOT really a matter of being UNable to afford what you want to buy, it's a matter of NOT looking like a complete chump in the eyes of the person trying to rip you off. At this point in the trip, I was a complete chump. Fully a chump. I DON't want to live in a world where I can't



typical dog in India...not joking

trust friendly SOUNDing people that say they are trying to help me. When I'M in other countries like this, I try to be cool with everyone. It sounds cheesy, but as a proud American, I love an opportunity to show NON-AmericanS that people from the US

can be mellow and polite. IN time, India would completely wipe out this quality FROM my character. It was either be a guarded and jaded dick, or be taken advantage OF...over and over again.

March 27th

More harsh realities were revealed today, NO ONE was to be trusted. I NOW KNOW that this is a naive line of thinking..but, I was OF the mind that you had a good chance OF NOT getting ripped off by a hotel that you paid decent MONEY to stay at. We had reservations at this place, they have a website, there is a cleanly traceable path back to the party responsible for guiding our choices. Well, India said sorry, NO dice...you will get ripped off NO matter where you go. Today, the face of the rip-off was a smiling cab driver who took us ON a ride to some of the crappiest "bazaars" in the entire world. It's a traditional gift, one that we were well aware of before landing in country, yet...we were still totally taken in by it. We naively put our-

selves in the hands of the hotel concierge, and we were taken for a ride around all the boring parts of New Delhi. It wasn't a total loss though, I told myself from the beginning of the trip that my only two goals were to touch the Kumbh Mela water, and to see a guy that looked like Dhalism (from Street Fighter II). Being held captive in a taxi could easily be spun into a hilarious adventure through Delhi's ghettos...all from the comfort of a sporty Tata automobile (the vast majority of the cars we saw over there were produced by Tata Motors. They seemed like good cars).

Today was also the day that I learned that my Internet plan for the trip was a complete failure. I thought I was being a clever guy by purchasing an iPod touch before I left the US. This little computer was supposed to be music/games/video/Internet all rolled up into one handy device. Little did I know that India is basically run by one gigantic cellphone from 1999. Any



rolling three deep on the splitters

sort of wireless access requires you to have a phone capable of text messaging numerous times, all the while navigating a series of authorization websites in order to get access to the precious Internet melange. Joe said that this is so the government can keep track of your browsing, which added "invasive government" to India's growing list of offenses. Despite my poorly planned Internet connectivity solution, I am pleased to report that the iPod excelled in all of its other charges.

At the end of our guided tour of Delhi's crappy tourist stores, our driver took us to the train station. We asked to go there so we could secure train tickets to our next destination. The driver

INSISTED ON walking US to the tourist office, but requested that we follow a few feet behind him. Apparently, if people KNEW we were following him, they would beat him up. I'M NOT sure if this was true or NOT. It felt true at the time, but in retrospect DOESN'T really make a lot of sense. ANYway, he walked twenty feet into the building, cutting a straight line to the sign that read, in large english letters, "tourist bureau". So, uhh, THANKS dude.



Here I am, waiting to buy train tickets

The ONLY other COOL thing that happened today was the opportunity to buy beer in India. They handle things OLCC style...the sale of alcohol is tightly MONITORED by the government, and you have to go to a special store to get

the goods. Well, turns out that people in India love to drink, SO the stores there are packed. You KNOW those old MOVIES where they go into the stock exchange and you see people crowding around and yelling and holding up slips of paper and STUFF? Imagine a crowd of gnarly Indian dudes in tattered shorts...crowding around and yelling for whiskey...50 rupee bills in hand...and then throw a 6'4" white dude right in the middle of it. It was actually really FUN. I hate crowds of people, but this crowd felt organic somehow...a small wave of humanity that crashed gently against an ancient wooden counter. I scored some beers and some "Officer's Choice" brand whiskey. It felt like I had just DONE a thing.

Leaving Delhi, we had plans to lay over in a smaller village before catching a connecting train to Goa. The village was about 50 miles away from this place called the Ajanta Caves. They are super old caves that Buddhist MONKS used to hang out at.

They'd sit in there and pray or something. These plans were dashed when we learned that the caves were NOT open ON Mondays. We were bummed...but, little did we KNOW at the time, we would end up seeing these caves anyway...and would NEVER make it to Goa.

March 28th

Today was our final day in Delhi. This was a cool thing for us, because we really did NOT like Delhi. Delhi smells like fire, poo, pee, Nag champa, spices, and any of these things, lit ON fire...EVEN FIRE. Fire in India smells like double fire, and I'M NOT talking about a nice campfire fire...I'm talking POO burning in fire fire. ON our way to the train, we caught a tuk-tuk ride from an incredibly sexist Afganistani driver. It was jarring to hear him talk about "tits" and stuff...but, he played some lame dance music, and tried to impress us with his sound system...so, that was cool.

Before us now, another Indian

physical challenge...train travel. It's NO secret that I DON'T like babby. I find babby to be rude, demanding, and generally a sap ON my spirit. So, imagine my dismay when our 3AC train car put me toe to toe with babby...for almost an entire day. I would later find myself in much tighter quarters that I currently was in, but at the time things felt rough. The area we were seated in had two benches, with three seats each, facing each other. The family we were seated with decided to jam six people in there with us. We were clearly over capacity. It's NOT that these people were rude or anything, they were actually pretty nice, but COME ON guys...capacity. Respect capacity. My favourite



I'll never forget the infinite chant of "chaiunhaiunhaiunhaiunhai" emitting from the chai guys walking the train aisles. Their chai is top notch, and their song has since become my mantra.

part of this was babby CHOOSING to STAND ON the table that was directly in front of Me. IMAGINE you are ON AN airplane, and you have your seat tray DOWN... NOW imagine babby standing ON this seat tray...FOR HOURS. This was My first train ride IN INDIA. There was a secret BONUS to all of this though. The auntie of the group brought LUNCH for the entire family, and they offered to share it with us. This was definitely a COOL MOMENT, and I have to give INDIA credit for this ONE. They had My favourite INDIAN dessert too, Jalabi. I PRONOUNCED it wrong...and they all laughed at Me. But, that was cool, because I laugh at ENGLISH and STUFF...SO, I thought maybe things were just EVENING OUT or SOMETHING.



long stringy donut, my heart is yours

This was AN OVERNIGHT train ride, SO I got to experience what it's like to sleep in a MOVING land vehicle. It WASN'T that bad at all. I imagine it feels like what being in the ARMY feels like, and that made the whole thing cooler. I had to go to the bathroom IN the middle of the night, SO I walked barefoot INTO the (at the time) grossest bathroom I'd ever seen IN My life. Pretty COOL.

March 29th

We arrived IN BUSAVA to a BUMMER...we were wait listed for our train to GOA. The thidr verison of the way trains work IN INDIA is, they basically NEVER stop selling seats ON them, and it's ALMOST guaranteed that like a million people cancel their trips at the last MINUTE. I'M NOT entirely sure why they do this, or how it ENDS up WORKING out...but, apparently it does. It's terrifying to base the plans of your trip around the NOTION that 50% people WON'T show up for their trip. SO, we had this floating around IN our heads. GOA is supposed to be a pretty GROSS place, SO I DON'T

think anyone was super excited to be going to it. It's home to a type of music called "Goa", which, if played at a party in Detroit, would get a man beaten and bloodied.

So, with all this hanging over our heads, we hired a car to drive us to Jalgaon for the night... with the hopes of returning to Busava the following day to be zipped away to a place where we were certain to bear witness to German men in Speedos. On the trip over there, we were treated to what I imagine



bear witness to the measure of a hero equates to Hindi classic rock, played on a tape deck. A sort of cool moment came when the tape deck ate the driver's tape, and Joe was able to save it using the old pen rewind technique. It

felt like two cultures had come together, and car vibes were enhanced for the duration of the journey.

This was the point in the adventure when we all realized that Joe was the only person among us truly capable of navigating an adversarial conversation in India. Without Joe, Ryan and I would probably have been broke within 5 days...having given all of our money to men squatting over open flames (these are the men that have food that looks OK to eat). Joe had the ability to look India squarely in the face and say "NO M'am...that is too expensive" or "you aren't being very nice to us!". Ryan and I were constantly buckling under the various pressures that were mercilessly being applied by India's cruel merchants.

When we finally arrived in Jalgaon, it was not unlike the opening scene of Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome. Small town India was cool, but definitely had a Fremont vibe to it. At this

point in the trip, Ryan had ripped the seat of his pants...Spectacularly, so we had our first official MISSION: get Ryan some awesome (and cheap) India-styles pants. People stared at us as we navigated a really cool looking open air market, but we were undaunted, and eventually the pants were ours...well, Ryan's. We followed up this small victory with a Ryan haircut (75 cents, I believe). A FUNNY little move in India (especially the smaller villages) is that they shut down the

like real dudes...sitting at a bar somewhere in India.



I totally should have gotten my haircut here...Ryan scored on this



pictured: parts of Ryan's underwear you may have not seen before

entire power system for hours at a time during certain periods of the day. The charm of this far outweighed the inconvenience, and we spent this black out time in quiet contemplation. The day was concluded by getting trashed on King Fisher beers. We felt

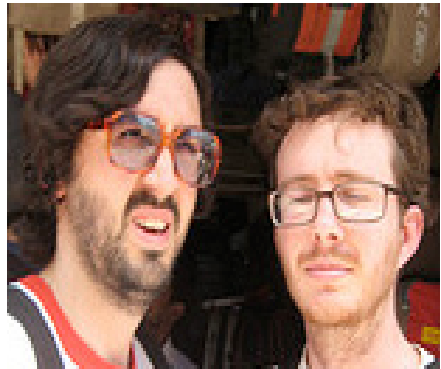
As far as bed time goes, we were basically old ladies during most of the trip. We'd go to bed at around 9pm, and wake up at around 5am. It was actually pretty nice. We slept a little easier this night, because we got word that our standby tickets to Goa had panned out! We were all clear for a 24 hour 2AC trip. 2AC is basically the Cadillac of India train seats, so we were super pumped. Little did we know... we would NOT board this train. Our trip was about to take a turn down intensity avenue.

March 30th

We woke up at 4am today, to make ABSOLUTELY SURE that we

would make our train to Goa. We weren't messing around...we were our own nervous mothers, making sure that we arrived at our port of exit with hours of time to spare. I think our train was scheduled to leave the station at 7am, we arrived at the station by 5am...incredibly proud of ourselves for quickly becoming seasoned travelers in this unholy place. Something you need to understand about Indian train stations is that there are no electronic signs indicating what is arriving, and where it's coming in at. You have to rely on sandwich boards, placed in a seemingly random pattern throughout the train station. On this morning, our sandwich board indicated that our train would be arriving on time at platform 2. So, we sat down at platform 2, bleary eyed, munching on gross breakfast curry burrito things, waiting for our victory to be complete. We waited and waited, making note that some trains were arriving behind schedule. It was this observation that lulled us into the false sense of security

that abated panic when 7:15am rolled around, and our train did not. Finally, at about 7:30, we decided that something was amiss. So, we set out to find someone that spoke enough English to quell our fears. We walked about 10 yards behind us when we saw it... our train to Goa, speeding away from platform 1. Crippling depression immediately hit.



I'm like "nawwww" and Ryan's like "I'm not even here right now"

Think of how bummed out you feel when you run to catch a bus, and it drives away moments before you reach the door. Now, imagine you are thousands of miles away in an incredibly hostile, hot, and confusing country. You just went through a day of anxiety, hoping that you'd have a seat on your only ticket out

OF TOWN, AND NOW that ticket has left you. For the distance that we needed to travel, you pretty much have to book your ticket two days in advance to even have a shot at getting one of those precious seats that people order and then inexplicably abandon. We had NONE of that. We were utterly defeated.

We went back to the ticket counter, and tried to (well, Joe tried to) fumble our way through alternative accommodations. No luck. It was at this, our darkest hour, that the true hero of India presented himself. A high school aged dude approached us, and was immediately met with suspicion. At this point in the trip, we'd been burned too many times to trust anyone that came



This is Rahul. He's wearing a shirt with the word "sailing" on it

bearing the flag of help giver. IN our slap happy haze though, we played ball. A few trips back and forth to various ticket counters later, and we had standby tickets to Mumbai. We decided to break our rule of trains and buses only, and attempt to grab a flight from Mumbai to the Southern state of Kerala. We were elated, and offered the young man 5000 rupees as a reward. To our complete shock, he refused. We were like "woah... what is this guy's story?". Now that we were past initial suspicions, proper introductions were made. Dude's name was Rahul, and since our train wasn't leaving until later this evening, he wondered if maybe we wanted to spend the day chilling out with him and his family. AWESOME.

Maybe it's because I tend to focus on life's misery rather than its rewards, or maybe it's because I KNOW that Joe and Ryan will do a much better job of explaining how cool our time with Rahul was...but I'm going to bullet point out this day of the trip, because that feels appropriate

to me for some reason.

- We go to Rahul's Aunt's house and drink chai
- We go to the cool little temple behind his house and meet like 20 people from his village
- there are puppies running around all over the place
- Rahul's ex-military dad drives us to the Ajanta Caves (which you may recall we had given up all hopes of seeing, since it was closed the day we arrived in town)
- I pay 800 rupees for something that normally goes for 50 rupees
- We eat at an Indian truck stop...seriously. It was basically plastic furniture setup at the side of the road
- We go back to the Aunt's house, I am introduced to the "SONNY", which the village kids refer to as the "Indian iPod"
- A 12 year old kid shows me like 5 videos of an Austrian weightlifter on his SONNY, and keeps looking at me expectantly
- We go to Rahul's house and watch some of the wedding videos that his dad makes for other

people in the village...they are amazing

- We go on an epic car ride through the back alleys of Jal-



Here I am, being mauled by a tiny Indian puppy.

gaon, and I see some National Geographic level of amazing things. Seriously, this car trip could be a ride at Universal Studios.

After all this excitement, the elephant god Vishnu smiles upon us, and we board a 2AC train to Mumbai...hoping against all hope that we'll be able to buy our way out of these delays by catching a flight to Kerala. 2AC is every bit as awesome as we heard it was. It was basically 3AC, but filled with businessmen rather than Babby. We met an awesome Sikh dude that introduced himself as a CAPTAIN. I'm not sure

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Every waking moment of this trip was soiled with the bummer of grift

what he was a captain of, but the guy was super nice...super cool...and looked like he walked right out of a Wes Anderson movie. We all fell asleep at around 8pm, and arrived in Mumbai shortly after 3am.

March 31st

This morning, we ran afoul of the deepest and most hostile grift of the entire trip. It began by waking up at 3am, exhausted, and stumbling through the darkness to find a taxi ride to the airport. We must have looked like the largest chumps in the world, and were promptly treated accordingly. The trick count for this part of the journey panned out as follows:

1) Driven around in circles for

at least half an hour, all the while being reassured that we weren't going the wrong way
2) Having to make a quick stop so that the driver could get out, and have his friend take us the rest of the way

3) Handing the driver 2 500 rupee notes, and watching the driver drop them quickly to the ground and pull up 2 100 rupee notes...then asking us to hand over the other 800 rupees that we owe

4) Being asked to pay an additional 500 rupees when he stopped the car (we had finally had enough at this point, and just jumped out)

The best part of this rip off is that Joe mentioned that. For a moment, he was considering being physical with the guys. Joe knows Karate, so it would have been really cool. Fear, nihilism, polite upbringings, and fatigue all teamed up, and we moved on without a confrontation. Damage was done though, at least for me. This was the moment of the trip when I realized that this country was out to get us, and

and I had to make some changes in the way I conduct myself with the general public. Also, Joe needed assistance. I don't know if I got it across very well so far, but Joe was the only one of us that had it in him to be contrary to the rip off artists in any way. Ryan and I were constantly being dragged into conversations that we knew would lead down rip-off lane but we just didn't have it in us to put a shield up and say "NO, SIR". Well, this cab ride gave me my shield, and I vowed to be like Roseanne in that one episode of Roseanne when she is threatened with violence at work, and takes that self defense class where she yells "NO" a lot. That was going to be me.

Luckily, once we were inside the airport, the threat of rip-offs went down to zero. We felt a little silly for getting airplane tickets, but we needed to buy some time back from the day that we had lost by missing the train. Besides, the airport was paradise. It was there that I experienced the greatest tooth

brushing of my life.

We left without a hitch, and arrived in the southern city of Trivandrum at around 5pm the same day. One long car ride to Varkala later, and we were at the coast. This was to be the spot that we rested and re-stored. Also, a place that Ryan could surf and stuff.

April 1st

Today I swam in an ocean for the first time in my life. It was shocking! I walked out into the Arabian Sea and sort of had a moment of freaking out because I couldn't figure out why I suddenly tasted pretzel. It was just salt water though, haha. We spent most of today hanging out at this beach in India.

There was garbage all over the cliffs, nice. I'm not really much of a beach person. I like swimming in the water, but I have absolutely no interest in the stuff that happens on the actual beach. Sand everywhere. Gross naked people being naked before my eyes. Things in the sand that might attack my feet. Things in

the water that I can't see that want to touch me and then my skin has reactions to their touch. It's just not a cool place, at all. Oh, another uncool thing about the beach...I didn't realize that if you use a boogie board, it will rub the sun tan lotion off of your body. Are you kidding me, sun tan lotion? So, I walked away with a boogie board shaped sun burn that haunted me for the rest of the trip.



Here I am putting sun tan lotion on Joe

We spent the remainder of the day playing Gin Rummy, and drinking King Fishers out of tea Kettles (a lot of these places weren't legally allowed to sell beers, so they had to hide them in tea pots). Varkala turned out to be a new age-y tourist zone. I spent an entire breakfast list-

ening to someone else's conversation. It was all about being spiritual and destiny and stuff. They talked about how television was evil, and how "the impossible is actually possible, that's what yoga shows us." I DON'T THINK SO, BUD. Joe pointed out that I was a dick for being mean about their conversation, and he was probably right.

I bought a 40 rupee Snicker's bar, and I didn't even care.

April 2nd

Today I got mad at Joe. It was the first, and essentially only confrontation that occurred between any of us during the trip. As you may recall from previous days, I was trying to be more assertive with India. I was only a day or so into this mindset though, and still had a long way to go before I could master the moves. Anyway, my mastery wasn't as developed as it should have been, and Joe was vibing on this...giving me what I considered "a hard time". So I told him to lay off. The gist of it is...

I tried to handle our laundry situation, but failed to get an exact time of delivery...or price for services, and this had the potential of making us late to go rent a house boat like Joe had wanted to. So, Joe did some "you really should handle things this way" moves...and I did some harsh "LAY OFF" moves and it didn't turn out good for anyone.

Then, I didn't have any clean shirts...so I walked to the market place without a shirt ON, with the plan to just buy one there (this is a really gross thing. I'm not proud of walking around without a shirt ON, OK? I swear to you though, it was a more normal thing at that beach than it ever has been in my life). Apparently I had some deodorant showing on my armpits...which is usually a thing I can cover up with a shirt. But, you know, shirtless right now. So, Ryan and Joe pointed it out to me and I got really mad and was like "yeah, I know...I don't like it either". And then I was mad for a little bit, but I was OK after breakfast. We got our laundry

they had done an awful job.

back, and we took a cab to this place called Koram. We planned to stay the night before catching a plane back to Delhi the following morning. Our driver was this pretty cool dude that works in the oil fields of Iraq for most of the year. He said he had a fat American boss that liked to sleep with prostitutes, and would constantly say the word "Fuck". So, all the oil field workers called him "the fuck man". That was a pretty good conversation.

We managed to get to the house boat place that we wanted to get to. The boat looked great to us, and boasted AC in the bedroom. We were psyched up. After some swift negotiation, we were swept out to a huge lake thing where we'd sleep on a boat. The ride out on the lake wasn't anything super special though. Having grown up in Michigan, the great lakes state, I have to own up to being a little underwhelmed at the nautical adventure before me. The lake was fairly pedestrian, and, if not for the occa-

SIGNAL dead dog floating along the shore, I could have easily MISTOOK it for some mid-west weekend spot. We took a canoe ride through a village, and a lady showed us how to make rope out of the fur that's on coconut shells. I'm still not really sure how it works. Joe kept the rope. We spent the rest of the night drinking whiskey and playing GIN RUMMY. I thought it'd be a clever idea to bring the fan from the bedroom out onto the deck of the boat. During the course of this, I managed to break the fan. Woah, moment of clarity, maybe *I* was the problem on this entire trip! Anyway, we weren't stressing too much, because we knew we had AC to fall back on in the bedroom. I was going to spend a lot of time talking about how India is the hottest place I've ever been to in my life, but, I just came back from Orlando Florida, so I can't really say that anymore. It was pretty hot though, and there were MOSQUITOS all over the place...using our bodies without



I could have swam across this thing

permission. So, we finally decide to go to bed. And, SURPRISE, the air conditioner only works when the boat's engine is running. I can't really call this a rip-off move, but it still left us feeling pretty bad about the trip. We fell back to our broken little fan. Imagine you are inside of a tiny box, and you can only crack the windows a tiny bit because you have no screen or mosquito net. Now, imagine 3am rolls along and all power to the boat is off. Fan and everything. It was 100+ degrees, and we were all just laying there in our underwear, dying. I remember thinking that the yoga shows us that the impossible is possible...and then trying to remove my brain from the situation. Eventually, morning came, as it is wont to do. We

emerged FROM our box, and rode back to shore in silence.

April 3rd

When we finally got back to shore, we dashed off the boat before the crew noticed that I had destroyed their bedroom fan. This time, WE were the gifters, and it was NOT a feel guilty moment. The rest of this day was fairly normal. We rode a train to Trivandrum that departed from this funny communist train station. There were posters all over the place about the people being super important. There were also public notices about people complaining that the police were beating them up for NO reason. Eventually, we ended up at this place called the Princess Hotel. We sprung for a pricier, but much nicer room...to stave off some of the misery from the previous night's sweat lodge. Ryan ponied up a little bit of extra money because "he" wanted the nicer accommodations. I felt guilty about letting him do this, because I knew that I wanted the nicer room just as much as

he did. I am admitting this here for the first time, sorry Ryan. We spent the rest of the night laying in bed, watching a TV show called "Dance India Dance".



April 4th

We flew to Delhi today. Our final "make up some time" move. The rest of the trip was to be Kumbh Mela-centric. We were going to make our way north, to the town of RishiKesh (the place where the Beatles went and hung out with letchy yoga guy). After a few days there, we were going to saunter over to Haridwar, where we would assure our supreme reincarnations via dipping our toes in the holy river Ganges. The promise of

deep spirituality lay ahead, but first, we would have to face-off against Delhi in combat once more. Getting off the plane and being back in that city was jarring, but we bravely set out for the train station's tourist office, hoping to secure train passage north. Of course, we got there 10 minutes after the office closed, and were immediately inundated with throngs of gross dudes trying to help us get tickets. I told them all to F off (actually, I just said NO THANKS), and we got in the super long public lines that every nice Indian person has to deal with in order to get their train tickets. Unfortunately, people don't really care about lines in India. To be at the front of a line in India doesn't mean that you have been waiting the longest amount of time...it just means that you had the least amount of trouble with pushing 100 people out of your way to get there. After about an hour of not having the least amount of trouble, we were next, and were quickly turned away. The

trains were all full.

Now, we were desperate to get to Rishikesh, and had absolutely NO idea how this was going to happen. The Mela attracts literally millions of people, and a good portion of those people come from Delhi. Every possible "tourist" form of transportation seemed to be booked. It was 5pm, and we were instructed to wait at a bus station until 9pm in order to catch the last tourist coach out of Delhi for the night. So sit we did. We sat in a burned out husk of a parking garage and watched thousands of people come and go. I will remember this place most by its bathroom, a chamber of horrors that currently haunts my dreams as the gnarliest bathroom I have ever been to in my entire life. We spent a long 4 hours there. I read about software engineering (which seemed like science fiction when contrasted to my surroundings). When 9pm came along, our bus did NOT. We panicked, and were eventually tossed onto one of those buses that you see on TV and movies where they

are trying to show you how F'ed up traveling in India can be. It was at this point in the trip that I realized another trap that we had been constantly falling into, the comfortable tourist move. I don't think this one is entirely mean spirited, but no one in India seemed to understand that we did not require our mode of transportation to be comfortable. Sure, we were willing to shell out an extra \$5 here or there to have slightly better accommodations, but it certainly wasn't something we required. I think we lost a lot of time on the trip because people weren't willing to suggest we travel "with the people", which we were totally fine doing. Anyway, the bus. The windows all had bars on them, and the bus was packed. We were all jammed in a corner for about 6 hours while the bus rolled over unkind bumps, and the bones of errant dogs. Ryan managed to save the day by playing some excellent spaced out jams on his ipod for me (headphone splitter), but neither of us slept a wink. We arrived in Rishikesh

at 4am. Once again, we were beaten by India.

April 5th

Rishikesh is a really cool looking town. It's sort of situated on two facing cliffs, with the Ganges running between them. There's a huge, sketchy suspension bridge between the two cliffs that I often fantasized dying on, a la that last scene in the Temple of Doom when the thuggee priest chases Indiana and Short Round to their near deaths. The town was nice though, and the mountain breeze was a welcome addition to the harsh Indian mid-afternoon. We took it easy today, destroyed from previous night's lack of sleep and bus death ride. As the town slowly came alive, we realized



I said a prayer each time I crossed

that we were completely surrounded by New age yoga bros from around the world. This place appeared to be ground zero for finding yourself, and find yourself the people did. An informal survey of our neighbors indicated that the South Americans were the grossest, the Germans were the lamest, and the Americans were the most lost/confused looking. I feel like I'm being overly judgmental and harsh here, I'm sorry, this is just what I saw. I'm sure most of these people were perfectly well intentioned human beings, but when they all get together in one place like this, it's hard to not react to the mass of "awakenings" you are forced to bear witness to. Sandals, everywhere.

Our mellow afternoon concluded with us booking a "trek" for the next day. We were faced with the choice of safari, trek, or rafting trip. Spoiler alert, trek sucked. This was one of those moments in life when I wish I could see what would have happened if we turned to a different page in the adventure book

than we actually did.

April 6th

We got up at 4:30am to go on a trek that promised we would bear witness to the sun rising over the Himalayas. After an hour race against the clock car ride up many winding roads, followed by the climbing of a billion steps to get to some old temple, the promised sun showed its hateful face. After this brief moment of victory, all hope was immediately removed from our spirits, as we were subjected to a brutal 40 degree descent through 10 miles of rocky awfulness. I was limping for days after this. After having driven over an hour, climbing the entire time, I thought it was sort of impossible that we were actually going to walk back to our point of origin, but, we totally did.

Today was also our day of great Kumbh Mela victory, where we would all realize every American's dream of ending their reincarnation cycle. This was supposed to be the pinnacle of

the trip, but ending up being a fairly quiet affair (by India standards at least). We were



Achievement Unlocked: 5G ānanda

able to navigate our way through the ocean of pilgrims, and secure a spot along the Ganges, where-in we placed our feet (except Joe, he went all the way under). We even got to invoke a traditional Indian prayer, while we released small boats filled with flowers. Many small boats filled with flowers gave their lives to the sea on this day, but that seemed like a fair trade because flowers otherwise just sort of sit there and do nothing but attract insects. We filled up airplane-sized liquor bottles with Mela water, and caught a tuk-tuk back to our hotel, completely bypassing the carnival of Sadhus and pilgrims that made up a large

tent village on the outskirts of the festival. In retrospect, this was my largest regret of the trip. We probably would have seen many many awesome things if we spent a few hours wandering the grounds, but we were all mentally and physically sapped at this point, and our only thoughts dwelled on making sure we had reliable transportation to ferry us to our awaiting flight in a timely manner.

April 7th

After sticking our hotel manager with the soiled 500 rupee note, we rushed off to where our car would be. One last obstacle stood in our way. Unbeknownst to us at the time of car securing, the street that we were supposed to board at was blocked off by Indian police officers. The Mela was beginning to take its toll on the capacity of this small town, so access was beginning to get cut off. Armed with only the colour and license plate number of the car, we set up a number of small checkpoints where we could each desperately try to ID

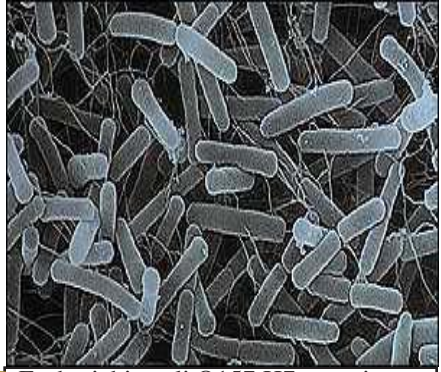
our car within the endless sea of slow moving, angry traffic. Luckily, cooler heads prevailed, and we were able to successfully board the car and get the hell out of Rishikesh. There aren't really words to describe how psyched I was to be in this car...knowing that the hard parts were officially over. Nine hours later, we would safely arrive at the Delhi airport, with time to spare. As Joe put it at the time "I must have seen a million



see ya later, creepy Indian David Bowie

today". It was a long nine hours. We only traveled about 150 miles...but it still took nine hours. That's just how India rolls. There are basically no expressways, just a series of interconnected roads that snake through villages and cities with little variation.

So, we're at the airport. Life is good. To celebrate, Joe and I went downstairs to the airport bar and slammed some King Fishers. We had done it, we were



Escherichia coli O157:H7 ... up in me

escaping. LITTLE DID I KNOW THAT THE NEXT SIX DAYS OF MY LIFE WOULD BE A TRIAL UNLIKE I HAD EVER FACED. Yeah, all caps.

April 8th

Today was my 30th birthday. 30 years old. I've wasted my life. I'm grateful to be 30, because I feel like the 20s are essentially a dark closet filled with the occasional indiglo watch face, telling you how close you are to 30. I feel like the 20s are a reimagined middle school, where-in suddenly it feels like anything is possible. This line of thought is

sedative. I feel like the 20s are a time for making costly mistakes, and spinning your wheels. Unfortunately, I feel like the 30s are a time to reflect back on your 20s, and lament the head start that you have gladly handed over to your dreams. It's a slap in the face, and it's a slap in the face that I had to endure three times. You see, due to our 11:30pm departure time and our western facing flight path, the cruel reality of time zones forced me to turn 30 three times. Dark. I complain, because complaining is easy, and typically more interesting to read...but, I actually don't mind being 30 that much. Expectations are lowered when you are 30. The measure of a man is more clearly defined during this phase of one's life...and it's easy to skirt around those requirements and end up looking good on paper without having to sacrifice too much of what actually matters to you. 30 is fine.

So...I'm thinking about all this during take-off, and it occurs to me, LITERALLY as the plane is

speeding up to begin its ascent into space, my stomach is NOT doing so well. I turned to Joe and Ryan to report this, and I guess my face was green or something like that. Uh oh. The next 20+ hours of travel are sort of a blur to me, but I do recall the following events...

- Throwing up no less than 12 times on the flight to Amsterdam, at least four of these incidents happening while I sat buckled in my seat
- People around us handing their unused barf bags to me



after 30, there are no excuses

- The half elf dutch stewardesses...staring at me in disgust
- Joe carrying my bags of barf to the garbage can (thanks, Joe)

- laying in the aisle of the airplane, waiting for the bathroom to become unoccupied

- getting up NO LESS THAN ONCE every 15 MINUTES...FOR at least 10 hours...to use the bathroom. GROSS, right?

- staggering home to my house, carrying all my travel gear. Delirious, confused...

- taking the best shower I've ever taken in my life...falling asleep while watching Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire

I fly at least twice a year, I'm not a bad flyer. I DON'T suffer from motion sickness. I can read in the car. I drank bottled water during my entire tenure "in country". So, where did I slip up? Initially, I suspected a piece of chicken-centric pizza that I had eaten at the Delhi airport, but the timing of that slice DOESN'T really jive with the ONSET of the illness. A similar plague would befall Ryan a few days after we returned to beautiful Portland Oregon. So, I am now of the mind

that we got sick from eating yak cheese sandwiches in Rishikesh. The restaurant we ate them at had a noticeable rat population tittering around the walls, but that's par for the course in India. So, I suspect that our systems just weren't prepared for complex dairy product like this.

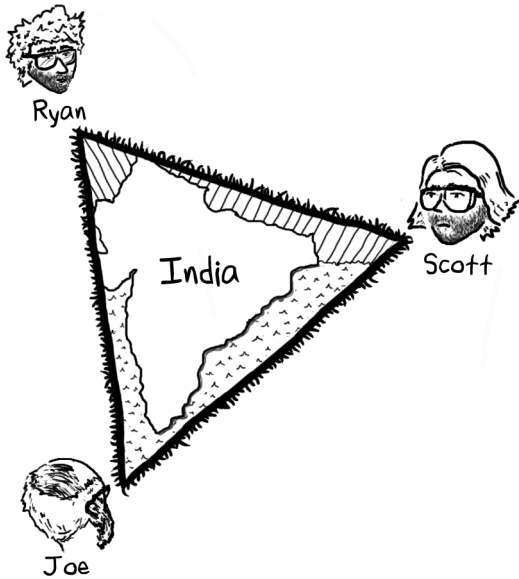
Anyway, India got the last laugh and I like to imagine the whole event happening like the end of a Brendan Fraiser Mummy movie where the plane is flying away and this huge sand shaped figure that represents India suddenly forms and reaches up towards the plane and shoots stinging insects at us. F YOU INDIA.

F you India, forever.

Seriously though, the trip was awesome...and I hope that someday I get to go back over there. No lie.

Love,
Scott

Rank Smells, Car Horns, and Lots of Dishonesty: An Indian Adventure with Friends Scott and Joe. By Ryan.



It's best to start at the beginning. And the beginning begins in America, way before we embarked on the trip. For years Scott had been occasionally mentioning the Kumbh Mela festival. "It's like," he maybe said, "Burning Man, except totally religious and legit and 60 million people turn out for it. I don't know/care about you, but I'm going!" And to that I would say, "Fine. Go then. No, really, I mean go. It's your turn." And he would turn his face and look at me, slightly puzzled, before realizing that I was "over" the Kumbha Momba conversation and had switched over to talking about Uniwar, a pretty fun turn-based strategy game that we play on our phones. It was his time to move his guys.

But then one day it was crunchtime. Time to buy tickets and go or not buy tickets and not go. Scott stepped up and executed the necessarily clicks, and then boasted to me about his skills at clicking and submitting forms. So, in a fit of jealousy and thoughtfulness, I thought about my life and how I hadn't been abroad in aeons and how I had lots of vacation hours to use. And thus, a decision was made. THE decision, in fact. The decision to go. And then the next thing that happened is that Joe start posing a series of questions and statements to Scott and me: "Should I go?" "Maybe I should go." "What if I go?" "Guys? What if I go, guys?" And so forth. Eventually these queries were

made moot by his purchase of a ticket. And thus, a three-pointed triangle was formed, with one of us on each corner, and India in the middle, and the rest of the world outside it, and some soft fur running around the border. Kind of like that picture on the first page.

While waiting for the months to pass so that we could board our airplane, we filled out the appropriate paperwork to obtain traveler VISAs. The application involved us taking passport-like photos of ourselves. Joe's was amusing because he totally looked like a terrorist in his! And I had to retake mine, as my first one made me look strung out and sinister. Here are pictures of our pictures:



"let's do this," says scott



my "good" one...



joe looks like a terrorist!

Some people are good at, and interested in, planning the details of trips. I feel like I am one of those people. However, how I feel like I am, and how I actually am, do not always correspond. Basically, I did not spend these months leading up to the trip planning much. I laid out some basic goals (go surfing, dip my feet into the Ganges. um, ride a train? and stuff), and then I read a bunch of message board posts about surfing in India. Scott had similarly simple goals and little attention to detail. But Joe! Joe was a powerhouse planner. He thought of the details (train scheduling and ticket purchasing, itineraries, vaccines to get, what food to eat and not eat, etc.), and he presented them to us on a regular basis for us to discuss. I will state this at the beginning: this trip likely would have been a total disaster were it not for his careful planning. Scott and I's "wing it" philosophy would have put us in some deep shit. The country, it turned out, was not simple to travel around in, and things were constantly going wrong, and so the knowledge we had beforehand helped us out a lot. I mean, Scott and I were hoping to ride camels into a desert and camp there and drink Mela Punch and stuff. But stuff like that isn't as straightforward as one would fantasize. So, the planning helped a lot.

Vaccines! That's something we had to do beforehand. Malaria, Typhoid, Polio, and I think Hepatitis A. Because apparently all that stuff is rampant in India, which is a bad sign, right? Like, if that stuff was rampant in the United States, I'd be like, "um, hello the government, why aren't you doing a lot to eradicate these things and make our lives better? Helloooooooooooooo?" I can tell you right off that if someone asked these questions in India, the answer would be, "...."* because there basically is no government, and whatever is happening over in CentCom, it isn't supplying the country with basic things like: sanitation, garbage service, water, road work, etc. But I am getting ahead of myself!

*Actually, the government would do a little head bobble, and then say, "Yes sir, no problem! No problem, Sir!"

Here is a picture showing Scott getting vaccines. Scott hates getting shots. But he braved this well (note: he did not know I was taking pictures... I don't think).



Joe went at a separate time, and no one documented his shot-getting. I know I know...

Packing: This was a two week journey, and the goal was to pack lightly. I borrowed a backpacking backpack from reliable friend, Renee. Here is a very small picture of what I packed.



It's not a lot of stuff. I was going to go for zero electronics (the cameras were fully manual), but Joe and Scott convinced me to bring an iPod. They are wise sometimes. I left some room in the bag for presents and stuff. I didn't have any real idea of what presents I

would be looking for. I didn't even have a mental list of who to buy presents for. But eventually I thought about it a little, and I was like, "I should probably get some presents for my family."

Notice the toilet paper. For some reason (basically no government!) toilet paper is a super rare item in India. So, we were advised to bring our own stashes of TP.

The plane ride was a plane ride. I don't know. You just sit there for a lot of hours. I'm not sure what else to say about it. We sat there for a while, and then we made it there. Well, we did change flights in Amsterdam. I enjoyed looking out the window as we neared Amsterdam. There were lots of giant boats in the water, and some oil derricks and whatnot. That was my first time seeing the

main continent in Europe. Here is picture of Joe and Scott in the Amsterdam airport. It wasn't a very impressive airport. But we ate McDonalds, and it was kind of fun ordering it from a Dutch person.



joe & scott waiting in the amsterdam airport, opening bags

Onward! After the final batch of sitting for a while in a plane, we landed in Delhi. My dad recently asked me why it's sometimes called "Delhi" and at other times "New Delhi". I didn't have an answer, except to note that there is a section of the city called Old Delhi, and, dunno, maybe that section used to be called just Delhi, with the rest of the sections being called New Delhi. But then maybe the "gov" decided to rename Delhi to Old Delhi, and so decided that they could safely drop the New from the rest of the place. Okay. So it was nighttime when we arrived. Initial impressions are important. So here are some. It felt like we had traveled far - we were, after all, on the other side of the world. So, it was late, and our goal was just to meet our hotel's driver, drive back to the hotel with him, and then go to sleep. International airports are made to make sense to people of all nationalities, and so everything was basically as expected. We weren't immediately shoved into a temple with floor toilets (although I did walk into a bathroom

in the airport, see a floor toilet, and then say, "too soon!" and then walk out). Everything was mostly normal. There weren't a lot of staff walking around, though. But it was midnight or so, so... I can't really remember, but I think we exchanged a few bucks for rupees (like in Zelda!), and bought some water, and then walked a very wide gauntlet of Indian people standing and looking for their relatives or people to give rides to. Everything seemed orderly. No one rushed up to us and inquired about where we were from and if we needed to get to so-and-so, etc (I only note this because after this these "helpful" inquiries were thrust upon us multiple times per day every day for the rest of the trip). There were security guards wielding machine guns, though. We found our driver dude - actually, we found a guy who then lead us to our driver dude... weird - and then we were off! Outside, it was dark, pretty warm and humid, extremely dusty - the sky glowed a dense orange - and not very well-lit. We passed through a tunnel while going to the parking lot, and there were some destitute old fellows wearing tattered white rags. I looked down at them and nodded solemnly. This is what I was expecting. My prior impression of Delhi was that it was like 80% slums, and those living in the slums had little access to water, etc. So I saw these guys and was like, "that New Yorker article was right!" and then I nodded - forward nodded, actually; no eye contact necessary.

For the ride from the airport to the hotel (the pace of this narrative will speed up, don't worry; and I'm going to start skipping chunks in exchange for describing the environment), we stared wide-eyed out the windows. There were lots of palm trees, and not a lot of retail stores, and small stone walls along the road, plus lots of unfinished road construction projects, and bicycles and tuk-tuks and other people using the road and going approximately 20x slower than us that we thought we were going to kill (or the person behind us would kill). And sometimes there were cows in the road!! Also, I wasn't seeing any road signs, and there were lots of roundabouts, and we drove for miles. It felt dense (with trees, mostly) and closed in. I was completely and utterly lost. Occasionally there would be swatches of retail and hotels along the road. They were mostly white, painted-cement buildings lit up with big neon signs. I saw a cop on duty hop onto the back of a non-cop motorcycle.

But then we got to the hotel. It was crammed up against a row of buildings in a narrow alley. The alley was all businesses, and was fairly active. Ajanta Hotel. Recommended by Lonely Planet. Scott and Joe both had the Lonely Planet. This book proved

very very helpful at many times throughout the trip. We were led in to a room to discuss room arrangements. Our bags were left in the lobby - something that all of us very paranoid about. But the place had like 10 staff members working in the lobby, most of whom were not doing much except looking toward us and then nodding when we made eye contact. Joe dealt with the room stuff. We can't



joe and scott discuss the bed's firmness

ALL be the main man on this stuff! At this point we were unsure about tipping. Plus we didn't really know if a tip of, say, 20 rupees (like 50 cents) was good or not. But, yeah, we got our room. It had no windows, but it was okay.

I turned on the TV. I got that impression that Joe was sticking to his "TV is lame" principle, even though we were in another country, and TV is a great way to get some insight about the culture. I mean, hey, I don't really watch TV, but I think that even though it's not a PURE way to experience the country, it's still super interesting to see what sort of programs they have (really weird music videos with a VJ segment in between vids where people can have their text messages posted, cricket, football, "So you think you can dance?"-type gameshows, little children singing classic Indian songs in front of judges, and more!). He flinched when I turned it on, and tried not to look at it. I guess it's important to stick to principles about stuff... plus he was, you know, reading books and planning our adventures. While I was laying there watching TV...

The power in the building went out periodically throughout the night. That was another thing I noticed while on the ride to the hotel - massive jumbles of electrical lines running from building to building. Do electricians have to be certified in India? Does the "government" have any involvement with public infrastructure and utilities?

In the morning we wedged some brekkie, as they say, in the hotel's buffet. And then we procured a driver to drive us around the city all day! Joe wanted to see some temples and holy shites (ha?). And our plan was to leave the following day - GTFO of Delhi and

onto a train to the coast! But, one day in Delhi. Oh yeah, first we needed a train ticket. It was a last minute surprise to discover that the gov wouldn't allow us to purchase Indian train tickets while we were still in America. And trains fill up fast, so buying one the day before was risky business. But there were "tourist ticket" categories, plus the Indian Department of Trains is really nice about giving refunds when you don't use a ticket (which means that when you get on a waiting list, there's a good chance someone will drop out and you'll get their ticket). Here's something weird: before our driver took us to the nearby station, the hotel manager told us that whatever we do DO NOT talk to the driver as he leads us to the tourist ticket area of the station. There will be people attempting to convince us to go their own private travel office, or will charge us to reveal where the tourist ticket office is, etc. If we talked to our driver while in public, those people would beat him up because he was ruining their scam! Weird and scary! This really ramped up our paranoia. We were already worried about getting mugged. Plus Joe had filled our heads with examples of scams (a kid runs over and rubs shit on your shoes, and then someone else comes up and charges you to get them cleaned, etc.). So we were on edge!

But it turned out to be totally fine. We marched through the mass of people lounging or standing in the station, and headed upstairs. At the top of the stairs, there was a long hallway, but with only one active office area that I could see. Our driver looked at us and told us (he spoke!!) that this was the place. Then he went back to the car. Here is a picture of the train tourist travel ticket office. Joe kicked ass and got us tickets for the next day on the train we wanted. The first stop, before going all the way to the coast, was to check out the Ajanta Caves. Those caves are a national landmark.

The streets are absolutely jam-packed with people. Mostly men. 90% of them have mustaches. For the most part they dress nicely. They all seem to be moving, walking places, or bicycling, not carrying much, and wearing collared shirts tucked into slacks. Sharp haircuts, too. I frequently wondered - sometimes stupidly, sometimes aloud - where all these people could be going. There just seemed to be



no end to the movement. And most of them didn't seem to be doing much - not holding items, or with backpacks or briefcases, not carrying groceries, etc - they were just moving. In addition to all the people, there were vehicles. The streets often did not have lane markings or shoulder markings, but they were truly multi-modal:

rickshaws, motorized rickshaws (aka Tuk Tuks), cars, buses, motorcycles, bicycles, pedestrians, and carts (sometimes pulled by cattle).

Vehicles and people were in a constant state of chaos and near-collision.

There was no steady stream of movement

- too many different speeds, basically. So instead, they wove in and out of one another, and HONKED. Oh, how they honked.



joe and scott, acting normally. location: parking lot.

Another notable thing about the streets was trash. I did not see any trashcans on the streets or sidewalks. I just saw lots and lots of trash on the ground. Plastic bottles, mostly, and also bags and other junk. In addition, many spots would have little piles of bricks or dirt, or other remnants of unfinished projects, or just broken carts or bicycles. To top this off, the trash-laden streets were often used as a bathroom. Dudes would urinate right on the ground in front of everyone. And the smell of human shit - note: the shit of humans who are fed only Indian food; it's a distinct smell, indescribable, obviously - wafted to our noses quite frequently.



printing error?? or scott & joe got right possessed!

Our driver was nice. He spoke english fairly well, and he gave us some fun bits of data about the things we drove by. We went to a temple, and then a tomb (national monument), and to some shops. We were hoping to go to bazaars, but he kept taking us to

tourist shops that contained tons of pushy staff, expensive fabrics, and kitschy items. It took us a little bit to realize that he was intentionally not fulfilling our request while instead taking us to these shops. He was, it turned out, paid to take us to these shops.

And what's more, he would be fined if he didn't take us to them, and also if we didn't stay in them for a certain amount of time (this is what he told us). As objectionable as this is, we were still in a "okay, let's just see what happens" type



of mindset, and so we weren't getting angry about it. We were, though, telling him that we didn't want to go to these places. He would respond by laughing a little, sort of uncomfortably, but with objection, like, "haha, no, we are going there, you didn't just say that." It was surprising to find out that the driver we hired with our hotel would push us through bullshit like this. And it redefined our standards a bit.

We went to a small grocery store, and I got Appy Fizz! and some chips called Bingo! International Cream & Onion. We also went around the corner from our hotel and got beer. My impression of India is that not a lot of people drink alcohol. But in the big cities it's sort of different. More drug use. But barely any places sell beer. So this place was jam-packed. Scott will likely describe it in his narrative. Joe and I stood outside, and in front of us was a girl, probably six, with shins shaped like boomerangs (TB?). She was trying to get change from people. It was hard to imagine that she had only been on earth for six years or so - she looked so world-weary and street-smart, and it was a sad sight to see. This was nighttime. And she was just sitting there in the middle of the sidewalk. No doubt her parents make her do this, though I'm sure they have little choice.

The next day we went to a real bazaar! Thanks Lonely Planet. It was only like three blocks away, too. Paharaganj Bazaar. Basically, narrow alleys, with food cooking on the street, and tons of little shops of many varieties. We marched through the alleys, a little on edge (what if some urchins popped out and stole our

bags?!). Eventually we eased up a bit and hit up some shops. Scott got a sweet homemade shirt from Mohinder [see business card]. I was going to bring my Mohinder shirt to India (hardcore punk band from Cupertino, CA, early '90s), to see if anyone would get excited about it. But then I decided that I didn't want to risk ruining it, so instead I was wearing a Yaphet Kotto shirt.

For the most part the women dress quite nicely. They wear colorful Saris that drape around them elegantly.

There wasn't a huge distinction that I could see between the poorer women and the wealthier women. Colorful, nicely-patterned

fabric is not that hard to come by! We would see groups of schoolgirls sometimes. They would be dressed in uniforms. And one thing I noticed is that they often had really short, boyish haircuts. Until, that is, they became 14 or so. Then they grew their hair out. I saw only one girl over 14 with short hair the entire trip. And I saw lots and lots of girls under that age with short hair.



So these were the first couples days. And that means it's time to present my thesis! And it is this (the next seven paragraphs): First off, India is the Mexico of the east. This statement is not meant as an insult, per se. I just see a lot of resemblance between the two. Items: both countries are heavily religious and their gods/saints are depicted in colorful icons; both have really tasty food that's often wrapped or scooped up with flat bread-stuff; both are dusty; both have very similar architecture (steel rod-structured cement buildings, squarish, painted white); both often have advertisements and signage painted onto the outsides of those buildings; both have plateau regions; both are really family-oriented; both have lots of poverty; a lot of the dudes have mustaches. I don't know if that's convincing or not. I could go on listing similarities. But just trust me! (or trust that I believe it.)

And I think that Indians are enormously repressed. And I think it

has to do with being super religious, traditional, and having a caste system. And, to tack onto that, I think this repressive, self-denying religiosity is abetted by a super chaotic streetscape.

From observation only, one will quickly see that the facial expressions of most Indians lean heavily toward blankness. They don't look solemn or grim, not in particular, instead they just look empty. Total blank expression.

First: streetscape: This happened to me about a week before the trip started, while riding my bicycle on NE Broadway while on my way to the pharmacy to pick up malaria pills: I was in the bike lane, and there was lots of car traffic. So I was going faster than the cars. But still, I wasn't going very fast; I was probably going 4mph faster than the cars, and they were going like 8mph. So I was passing a minivan, and while I was next to it the driver decided to turn right, without a signal, onto the next street. I basically turned with the car, so as to not collide with the passenger door. But it was turning faster than I could turn, and if the driver didn't notice me, I was gonna get nailed. But he did notice me! And he turned away about half a second before I would have collided. He was sorry. And I was shaken up. While in the Wal-Greens getting my pills, I think I texted two friends (likely Joe and Scott!) to tell them about my narrow escape. So, this was a thing. A notable thing. I almost got hit. If I had actually gotten hit, it would have sucked, etc.

So now imagine that near-misses like this happened to you, say, 6-10 times per day. Every other time you crossed the street a raving cabbie would barrel mere inches away, blasting its horn. I think for a little while you would get shaken up each time, and you would probably be afraid to cross the street. And you might wonder what the hell is going on; why are so many people driving like madman, swerving, passing, passing while others are passing, going on the wrong side of the road, honking constantly and never yielding unless the vehicle about to barrel into you is capable of hurting you more than you it? But then, after a time, after you see that it is not letting up, and it is a way of life, and there is no way to avoid it, you will just resign yourself to deal with it. And why deal with it in a way that shakes you up each time and makes your blood boil toward your insensitive fellow citizens? Why not just go... blank. Blank it out. Resigned acceptance. Denial, essentially, of the cold chaos and danger. It is a defense! And it is one that so many people in India have taken up.

Second: add to that this uber religious caste-based social structure. The caste system essentially says, "This is your place in life, you cannot and you should not improve it. You have to just accept it." Extend this beyond the individual: there are gobs and gobs of trash on the ground - accept it. Roads are in disarray - accept it. Clean water is scarce - accept it.

Accepting this shit also means denying to yourself that it is bad and worth struggling to improve. And, saying this another way: denying these realities means lying to yourself.

And lying to yourself

- everyone lying to themselves - creates a state where people freely pass this on, and thus lie to one another. India has lots and lots of lying going on. I'm sure it's particularly present between local/tourist relations. Basically, with a smile and a nod, we were lied to constantly. Everything is fine! No problem, Sir. Sir, no problem! We heard that so many times. One example: "I will take you to the government travel office, this way, no problem." And no matter how many times we ask to verify that this is actually where this kind fellow is leading us, he'll answer the same. And he'll be lying. And it's not that he brings us to a place where we get robbed. He gets little from it. He's just a guy walking down the street who we ask directions to, and he leads us to his second cousin's travel office, and then he walks off (so he is attempting to look out for friends/family, and that's fine and all... but it's taken to an insane level). And we go, WTF! And we head elsewhere. It's sideways. It's runs deep into the psyche. Smile, nod, no problem sir, everything is right.



scott shares an example of a human facial expression

Okay, that was my thesis-thing.

Back to the market. Not that we wanted to avoid all contact with the locals, but when most interactions involves them trying to get money from us, it can be a hassle to dive into conversations with strangers on the street. The worst way to avoid interactions is to stop moving. The moment you stop walking, someone will walk up to you and want your money.

Scott and Joe bought billowy shirts at a small shop. A lot of the shops were super narrow with walls completely covered in stuff. Goods were cheap. Joe bought a backpack, too. One of the reasons I packed so light was because I wanted to buy clothes



corrugated roofs as far as the eyes could see. station.

while in India. Ya know, buy some native duds to help me blend in. My goal with clothes was thus: I wanted to wear billowy, flowing linens. I bought a shirt the day before at one of the expensive tourist trapshops. (the shirt was still only like \$10 or something). I

forgot to mention that. The shirt had a semi-hokey pattern on it. But it wasn't too bad. But I haven't worn it again since arriving back in the states. Joe and Scott also wanted some local duds. Our items procured, we took a tuk-tuk to the train station. We were excited about the train rides. We figured that taking trains would be a nice way to see stuff (from the sidelines), while still moving from one destination to the next.

We were early, and had hours to pass. The place was packed. And - hey hey! - there were very little seats. Most people, us included, had to sit on the ground. Lots of people slept on their bags, and on newspapers. We saw some transvestite Hindus - I can't remember their sect. But they're totally accepted in the country. Pretty surprising, given the country's patriarchal tendencies. And oddly enough, their faces were pretty similar. Super masculinely-boned faces. But, men in women's clothing, is what they were.

We stumbled across a bookseller selling, among other things, Mein Kampf. So Scott picked that up, naturally. I later read that Hitler is super popular in India. Look it up. He's big. I then bought some water (exciting!!!). And - here's something that happens a lot in India - when you are polite and say "thank you" for stuff, you receive zero response in return. And, again, I attribute to this weirdass caste-life repression. This is his job, sitting in a teensy booth in a train station, selling water. There are identical booths every 100 feet. This is him, and that's it! He accepts no

acknowledgment or thanks. He just sits, blankly.

But at least he's not a step or two below - as an Untouchable. There are no trashcans in India (generalization). The Untouchables are the trashcans. All the litter that gets dropped on the train platform gets swept onto the tracks. All the shit that while on a train gets dropped onto the tracks. The smell is everywhere, the trash is everywhere. Down below, on the tracks, these small, exceptionally dirty urchin figures walk back and forth, giant plastic bags slung over their shoulders. They absorb the trash. Everyone ignores them. And their faces are blank.



not untouchables. just sleepyheads.

Basic train info:

There are basically three classes (that we saw) of train cars. Sleep car - these cars contain as many people as can be crammed onto them. It is difficult to sleep on them, and they are less safe. Tickets are super cheap, though. 2AC. AC = big fans. 2 = how many people to a bench. The bench that serves as a backrest during the day folds out to be a bed at night. 3AC. 3 = three to a bench. With an extra bed above the bed that folds out - so, less room than 2AC.

Our tickets to Bhusaval were in the 3AC class. This was to be an overnight train ride. Straight south. We boarded and took our bench. We were the only white people for miles. The only ones in the Delhi station, and the only ones on the train. Guaranteed! The train was boarded and boarded and boarded. If we thought for a moment that we might have a chill, spacious ride, that thought was erased a few minutes into the ride. People emerged from wherever and took any patch of exposed nylon. 3AC was mostly made up of families. They brought their own food, and their own kids. Unluckily, our booth area had two four (or so) year olds. We were crammed in our spot, and these kids were climbing all over the place. Scott especially dislikes annoying kids, and these little runts were impossible to ignore. I didn't have a great view of outside. And so I just read (Timothy Zahn's The Last

Command - the third in the Thrawn Trilogy.... Star Wars novels!), and listened to music. I did not take pictures or take audio recordings, because I felt weird being this American guy busting out thousands of dollars of electronics.

But not doing so is my big regret! There were these guys who worked for the kitchen/catering service. They all wore the same red/blue plaid shirts, and they walked by every few minutes saying, "undchaiundchaiundchaiundchai" over and over. It was sort of hypnotic. (They were selling hot chai tea - actually saying, "Chai garm chai garm ghai" - and other stuffs).

In addition to the family across from us, two dudes barged in and had a mild argument in not-English with the mother/auntie, and then they helped themselves to a couple seats. Interestingly, despite this argument, and despite the fact that it had a crappy resolution (they took seats!), everyone was calm and normal (like Hindu cows!) for the rest of the time. The guys were shady businessmen of some sort. Joe noticed that one had major scabs on his knuckles - likely from punching stuff. The one without the scars was the guy's protege. Scar guy spent hours giving him hot tips.

Sometimes Joe and Scott and I would talk to each other. And at some of those times the mom, or the scar guy, would chime in and talk to us. They were all nice, and they gave us tips, too. But then at other times they would mysteriously lose the ability to answer us. We suspected this was so that they wouldn't have to completely reveal how much English they knew. So they could still listen to us, and maybe we wouldn't know if they understood us. Quite interesting. Also, it took us the entire trip to figure out what some of these peoples' relationships to each other were. Like, was this one guy a total distant and uninvolved dad (as dad's tend to be in India), leaving the mother to do everything, or was he just a stranger who sat nearby and shared their food?

At dinner time they gave us some of their food. Very nice of them. And damnit - GREAT food! I had been wary of buying pakoras and stuff from the chaiundchaiunchai guys, since I had been told (by Lonely Planet) to be careful about where I acquired my food, and to not eat stuff that wasn't freshly cooked.

It was around this time that we noticed the head bobble. But it took us a few days after this to figure out if it indicated a negative or a positive. When interacting with Indians, they would

frequently bobble their heads - exactly like a bobble head. At first we thought it meant, "no." But then we realized that it was closer to a, "yes, thank you." I have no deep insight about the head bobble. It's just a learned behavior. Once you've noticed it, it becomes hard not to look around at people on the street or in shops and see bobbling heads everywhere.

We all slept with our bags on our benchbeds. This made sleeping difficult. But it felt safer. I didn't bring a lock for locking my stuff up.

In the morning we watched the passing countryside. We saw a number of folks squatting down and taking shifts. We saw a weird military installation. We saw shanty-looking towns and farms.

In Bhusaval we took a taxi to the next town over, Jalgoan. Oh, I forgot to mention that the day before we discovered that these caves would be closed on the day of our arrival. Major duh. But they would be open the next day. But our next train (to Goa) was the next day. So, we totally blew our cave trip. But we couldn't do anything else except still visit those towns. The car ride to Jalgoan was the typical psychoride, with nonstop honking, passing, and narrow misses. And this was a road through the countryside.

In Jalgoan, we hit up the market. It was behind a big clocktower, and was made up of multiple open-air giant octagons, multi-leveled, with the shops in the buildings, and hundreds of scooters and motorcycles parked in the open plaza area. That's a terrible description. Previously, Joe had looked at my butt and noticed that my pants were ripping, thus exposing my ass to India. My only pants! My only ass! I knew what I had to do. I had to find a tailor and have him make me some billowy linen pants. And so that is what I did. But first I had to buy the fabric from a fabric shop. It was like a quest! They told me it would take a week. But... like, I needed them in four



here's one of the open-air giant octagons. please read story for explanation

hours. So we walked around the octagons with the fabric guy and found the right tailor for the job. They took my measurements right then and there.

Then I wanted a haircut! So I found a barber and got a haircut. It cost 25 cents. He asked me how much American barbers get paid, and I told him like \$20 per job. I felt bad telling him that. It was a decent haircut. A little bit shorter than I would have liked.

Then we hung around outside our hotel, watching the scene. I saw my first woman driving a motorcycle. Previously, they were only spotted riding - sidesaddle! - behind men. While outside, I busted out the beadies that I'd bought in the market in Delhi. Beadies are rolled tobacco leaves, tied with a string. They are illegal in the United States, likely because they are made by 8 year olds in India. Anyway, they are really mild, and almost smokable. However, smoking is pretty gross, so I had trouble finishing a whole one at once. I brought them back to the states! I still haven't finished them.

When I got the pants, at 7pm or so, they were very nice. A little bit baggy... but I had wanted billowy! So now wasn't the time to change my mind.

We ate dinner at the same place where we had lunch. Tasty food! This place had a wait. As usual, the Indian folks were all nicely-dressed, and with nice haircuts.

The next morning at, uh, 5am, we hopped on a train and went back to Bhusaval. Then we sat at the station, eating some snacks, wondering what the woman on the speaker was saying. We sat there for three hours. As usual, it smelled like shit. That's because every fourth train tie had a smoking human turd sitting on it. When the train we thought was ours showed up, we discovered that it was not ours. We then assumed that ours would be right after it. This assumption was very



incorrect. Our train, at that moment, was like 30 feet behind us on another track. There are no signs that tell stuff like this, and a few hours earlier we had verified with an attendant which



platform to wait on, and there was no obvious mad rush happening around us to the new platform. This train, which would have carried us for a day and a half to a nice touristy area on the coast called Goa, passed us by. This discovery was heart-wrenching,

and confusing, and scary. It took us a little while to process it. And then we went about getting new tickets. This was difficult, since the attendants barely spoke English (and we do not speak Hindi and whatnot), and we basically failed at it. We bought something... but I don't know where the tickets were to, and when the train would leave.

Looking confused and screwed, our cabbie from the day before showed up from out of nowhere, and proceeded to launch into the whole, "No problem sir, no problem sir" trip. He had a younger fellow with him, and this guy "no problem sirred" us a bunch, too. But he actually put more work into helping us get new tickets. He sold back the crappy tickets we'd just bought (like I said, India is super awesome about returning train tickets), and then we purchased some waiting list tickets for later that day. We were so happy that we offered to give this fellow all the money from the returned tickets (like ten bucks), but - what the hell? - he refused the money. Um, this was surprising. This fellow, Rahul was his name, was not after our money; he was truly just being a nice and helpful guy. He then invited us to his house to hang out for the day! And we said okay! We had 12 hours to kill, and Bhusaval isn't even in the Lonely Planet, so this was absolutely perfect. Our old cabbie was still hanging out, wanting to take us the caves. But Rahul helped us get a tuk-tuk ride (while Rahul rode his moped), and we rode through town to his auntie's house. (note: it took me like two hours to realize that Rahul and our old cabbie were not actually friends.)

This felt new, and it felt good. The real deal - we were about

to venture inside of an Indian's home. After navigating through a maze of dirt roads, we got there. It was a quiet area, with houses that had some space between them. We took off our shoes, went inside, and had some tea. The place was clean and colorful. Quite small and simple, but nicely decorated, with lots of pinks and greens. Various relatives walked around. And none of them were alarmed by us. I am fairly certain we were the first Americans to set foot in their house. They gave us some fried rice noodle things to eat. And we watched them make the noodles on the roof. Rahul called his dad, and set up a plan to drive us to the Ajanta Caves.



the inside of rahul's auntie's house

For the sake of your eyeballs, I'm going to flutter past some details of the day. Just get this! It was a good day. Aside from the gauntlet of pushy salespeople at the caves, it was a pleasant site. The caves are mostly-Buddhist caves, dug into the cliff along a bend in a river. Each one is fairly similar to the next. While in them, I could imagine living, hundreds of years ago, a pretty peaceful, solitary existence, just spending my days in a raw cave thinking about Buddha and enlightenment.



rahul's homies. they played cricket in the street

This area was pretty hot and open. I saw some exceptionally poor people who seemed to be living in huts along the middle of nowhere. Rahul's dad was the grandmaster of random car-horn honking. A foot every four seconds, no matter what was

happening on the road. It was a 45 minute drive to and fro. We

stopped off at a roadside diner-thing on the way back. It was dusty and open, with wind and birds, and a farm nearby. Our server (male) wore a mesh tank top. I ate my favorite meal of the trip at that unassuming cafe. Matoo Paneer. It was so oily and good, with big peas.

We went to Rahul's house on the way back (Rahul was 19, just out of high school, and wanted to move to Mumbai and pursue a career in animation). We sat around with him, his dad, and his sister. His dad is a retired military guy, and now does wedding photography and videography. He showed us some videos, and they were fricking totally amazing. Loads of crazy India-themed scene wipes, exciting dance music, and super awkward portraits of arranged couples, with the shots repeating over and over and over. They would be the hit of youtube. Alas, I doubt they'll ever make it there. I wonder if he would have given us a DVD, had we asked?



And then it was time to drive us to the train station, so we could catch our train to Mumbai. I think our plan at this point was to get into Mumbai, go to the airport, and then catch a flight to Kerala (skipping Goa). The drive to the station was a surreal ride through endless alleys lined with houses. Goats in the road, kids playing cricket or soccer, rivers of shit running between houses, weird construction projects. This felt like a close look at India living. It was amazing and chilling at the same time. Fairly claustrophobic, but everyone seemed harmoniously connected to one another.



personal hero, rahul

Our train car to Mumbai was 2AC. This was much better than 3AC.

We had our area all to ourselves. Our ride was from 7pm to 3am. So we went to sleep right away. I slept on the top bunk, and it was terrible. There was a mystery express breeze from the bathroom to my face, and so I was smelling horrible shit the entire night. I was barely able to escape it by tucking underneath the covers. It was a very lousy night.

At 3am, everyone disembarked en mass from the train. We had been given some tips by a military captain guy on how to get a taxi from the station to the airport. They were not metered rides, but were fixed-price, etc. So, harder to get ripped off in this foreign land at 3am, right? WRONG! We got totally jacked at this stage in the trip. And here's how it went down:

We groggily marched toward taxi-land. While still a ways away a fellow took step next to me - I figured him for another guy who had just gotten off the train. He casually asked me about blah blah. We chatted some. Then when we got to the taxis, another man walked up and chatted up Joe. He was offering us a ride right then and there. We were not so eager to jump in his taxi, so we doddled for a while. We were trying to scope out the scene, and figure out exactly what we were doing. But eventually, his "no problem, sirs" got the best of us, and we got in his taxi (he was also casually mentioning the Lonely Planet - smoother talker). Lo, this first character who'd chatted with me was his bro. He got in, too. Off we drove. Joe was very vocal about them not taking us the long route. He was sure they were extending the trip to get more money out of us. There was also a meter that I couldn't read, but I told everyone I could because I just wanted to get on with it. I don't even know why there was a meter, since these were supposed to a fixed-cost trip. Anyway, us three were on edge. We were looking hard for a scam. These two drivers were TOO nice and reassuring. It seemed like it had to be a set-up. After 30 minutes of driving (following all the "to airport" signs), we were almost there. By the way, Mumbai at night looked pretty neat. It looked a little more modern and open than Delhi. With more nature, too. About half a mile before the airport, on an empty freeway, the car pulled over underneath an overpass. The passenger explained that the driver lived near here, and he was getting out and going home. And that we needed to pay him now. We protested, but they wouldn't budge. They were also quoting us too high a price - claiming some middle of the night rate and stuff. Eventually we let in. Scott and I handed them a 500 rupee note each. And right before my eyes those 500 notes turned into 100 notes! "This is not enough!" They said.

"You only gave us 200, it is not enough!!" Uh, what? Scott and I both said. We looked at each other. It was late, and we could barely see our wallets, but we were both sure we'd handed them 500s. Joe, not realizing this, took the side of the drivers. "They needed 500s not 100s, you guys," he said. Oops, confusion!! Major confusion. The driver had the door open and was holding Joe's bag. Scott and I got talked into giving them two more 500s. They still claimed this wasn't enough, etc. (like, we owed them 1,400 not 1,200, or something). One weird thing is that although these guys were totally lying to us and had just ripped us off, they were calm and smiling (mostly). They were never going to escalate the interaction into a real argument. They were doing well at managing us and keeping us calm. However, Joe caught on that Scott and I had just got ripped off, and he started yelling at them. Thanks, Joe! We ordered them to drive us on, and said we'd talk about the rest of the payment after we got there. It was a messed up situation. The guy handed back Joe's backpack, and then walked off. When we got to the airport, we all straight bolted out of the car and ran away! YAY.

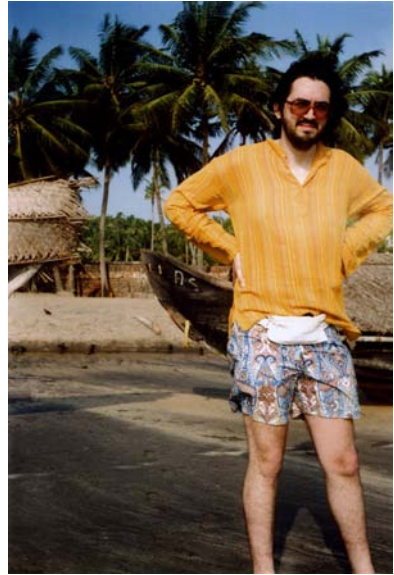
In conclusion, we felt crappy. But, it could have been worse. So we lost \$20. It was a learning experience. We were learning to loathe India and not trust anything that came out of anyone's mouth (save Rahul's; he was the one good, true person in this land). Onward!

Definitive sign that Mumbai is 5x more modern than the rest of India: women in tight skirts. The flight attendants were all dressed in tight skirts. This felt like an odd site to behold. But it was kind of comforting. We brushed our teeth in the bathroom, and then sat around until morning. Scott and I watched Venture Bros on his iTouch, and we watched the same 20 minutes of news repeated over and over on the TV. We were super paranoid about missing our flight. And even so, we got sort of close to missing it. We'd been sitting on the wrong area the entire time. Note: we are three intelligent, diligent, and fairly neurotic people, and we were quadruple-checking where our gate was... and still, we nearly failed. They don't present this information clearly enough. It's like, they will have two sections with the same departure gate name. Stuff like that. Also, it was illegal to take pictures in the airport.

The plane to Trivandrum (also called Thiruvananthapuram), the capital of the state of Kerala, was a nice plane. After this first stage of the trip, we were very ready for getting a hotel on the

beach and lounging around for a couple days.

We caught a taxi to Varkala Beach, about 40 minutes to the north. This was my choice. This part of the trip was "for me," to a degree, since I wanted to go surfing (and I'd read some books about Kerala whilst in college - communist state, highest rate of literacy in the country, etc). This is at the southern tip of India, on the west coast. The trees were mostly all beautiful tall palm trees. We drove by some nice lagoons that opened up into the ocean. As usual, there was gobs of trash lining the road. Maybe someday some entrepreneur will import trashcans into India, and some influential person will impart a sense of using them... but until then.



scott exposes fannypack to ocean

We used the Lonely Planet to guide us to a hotel. The place was called New Heaven, and our room was on the second story, looking out at the ocean. It was tucked in like 50 feet, surrounded by trees. Nice area, not the greatest hotel. But not totally horrible. We donned our native garbs and dipped our toes in the Indian Ocean. Immediately south of us was a pathway along the top of a cliff, like half a mile long, lined with shops and restaurants and hotels. This was the sorta-Bohemian low-budge touristy area of Varkala. It had a nice tropical vacation vibe. Many of the tourists were yoga-tourists, wearing billowy clothes and sporting dreadlocks, looking smug and spacey. We got beers and watched the sun set.

We spent the next day at the beach. The waves were not quite ganny enough to surf. But there was a small south swell. It was better for bodysurfing and boogieboarding. So we rented an umbrella and a boogieboard, and then we hung out on the beach all day and swam a lot. There was never a ton of wind, and the water temperature was perfect. Despite all the trash on the cliff (the beach was backed by a 60 foot tall cliff), the water was surprisingly clean-seeming. The beach seemed quite international. Out in the water, swimming near other people, you

would hear many different languages. And also, in standard yoga-tourist fashion, some folks on the beach would be practicing tai chi or stick twirling and stuff. I've spent a great chunk of my life in the ocean. But since moving to Portland three years ago, I haven't swam much. So it was really fun to spend the day in the water. And Scott was new to ocean-swimming, so I gave him some boogieboarding tips. He seemed to enjoy it.



Also, (this is going to sound sort of racist) there were India dudes who would walk up and down the beach just to leer at women. They were blatant and gross. Repressed people with wacked social skills, tantalized and then let loose. And here's the racist-sounding part: where I grew up in California, dudes would hang out on the cliffs or in the bushes at beaches - and lots of beaches, not only the nude ones - and would stare at the women in a most creep fashion... and 95% of the time they were Mexicans. So add that to the list of how India is the Mexico of the east.

Of course, we all got horrendously sunburnt from this, and spent the next few days in a state of sweaty, prickly pain. I had even reapplied sunscreen! AND sat under an umbrella! But dang, my chest, stomach, and shoulders were ruby red. It hurt to wear shirts. Oh, and I also had a bit of a cold at this point. Scott had gotten a cold, too. It wasn't terrible, but my nose was running a lot, and I felt sort of bad. But it wasn't enough to get either of us down.

One downside to this international tourist scene was that it was difficult to find Indian food. Too many of the places were specializing in German or English or wherever food. And it was never that great. Still, it was nice to sit at tables outside overlooking the broad Indian Ocean, drinking Kingfisher beers, and playing gin rummy. We played a lot of games.

Often, when walking past a shop, the shopowner would call and advise us to check out his or her wares. Refreshingly, these

people were usually pretty relaxed and not pushy. And I found it notable that it seemed like more than half of the little clothing/misc shops were run by women. Some seemed fairly young, like this was their start-up business. And their pitch was usually, "Would you like to see my shop?" It was a simple pitch, but you could sense some pride in their words. Overall, I found the whole situation - little shops and shopowners - to be cute. I bought some more shirts, and some trinkets.



joe and scott scanning the horizon

And I got some pens from some 8 year old

(or so...?) girls. They would run up to us at our table and show us their shops - which at this stage were wrinkly bags filled with little items. The restaurant owner would usually pop onto the scene and run them out of there. But then a few minutes later they would come back. And the owner would give up. And we would buy stuff.

That night while I was lying on my back on my side of the bed, with no shirt on and the ceiling fan directly above me - nose sniffly, chest burning red - a gecko that was stuck on the ceiling dropped a lizard turd onto my chest. I didn't know what it was at first, so I did a minor freak-out and turned on the light. And then we all laughed at me, and then I sighed and fell asleep.

I'm sure that some people visit India and just hang out the entire time at Varkala Beach. It would make for a good vacation. Hang out on the beach, do some yoga, watch the sunsets.

But that isn't our style! The next day we headed off to do what Joe really wanted to do: ride a houseboat along Kerala's famous riverways, and spend the night aboard it. On the cab ride to the town with the boats, the cab driver called his cousin who owns a boat, and got everything ready for us. It would have been nice to scope the options, and look for deals and stuff, but this is how it usually is in India - if you mention something to an Indian, they will usually have a relative who specializes in that thing, and all of a sudden you're roped into a situation.

The boat was nice-looking. They gave us a tour of the amenities, and told us what was in the package (one bedroom, staff of three, etc.). Joe negotiated some, and during the negotiations I noticed that the guy wasn't looking at Joe, but was instead looking at me (even though I wasn't talking). So I did some calculations, and realized that he was avoiding Joe because Joe was wearing sunglasses. Since he couldn't see Joe's eyes, he didn't feel comfortable dealing with him. Interesting! And here's another example of how I would monitor and correct Joe's interactions: the English that Indians learn is very proper. And if you spoke improperly - with your prepositions in the incorrect place - they would often not quite understand the sentence. I noticed this, and then I shared my findings!

The boat ride was pleasant. It felt nice to have a cool breeze on my face, and to cruise at a slow pace, in no big hurry, on a giant lake. We passed by scores of fishing boats parked along the shore. The boat had a lot of lounge seats in the front. It was Good Friday (or else it was Easter... I can't remember), and Kerala, due to Portugese colonialism, has a lot of Christians. Occasionally we would hear sermons or music warbling through the palm trees over PA systems, but we could never see any of the action. It reminded me of Apocalypse Now.

After passing over a big lake (it's where a number of different rivers connect before feeding into the ocean), the waterways got narrower. This was closer to what I was expecting. We parked and hopped into a canoe. And then a man pushed us along a narrow network of canals that ran through a lush island. This area was quite paradisaical. Birds chirped, folks walked around on shore in sarongs (which gave the impression that everyone just stepped out of a refreshing shower). Everyone seemed to be moving at a slow, relaxed pace.



In the evening we parked the boat along the shore. We played cards, and they made us a really great multi-course meal. Scott brought out the fan from our room,

and the stand broke. Oops. We managed to prop up the broken fan when we were going to sleep, but then, woe, the power went out. This resulted in a hot, crappy night. No power on the boat? It was odd. Scott had an especially terrible night. He couldn't sleep at all, and he referred to it as the worst night of his life. And as much as it sucks to say this, the lack of power was most likely due to one of the workers accidentally flipping a light switch outside our door. Like, we could have just gone and turned it back on, rather than suffered.

In the morning, we boated back to where we started. We quickly got off the boat and took off down the road. We didn't exactly know where we were going. But we saw an elephant! We finally found a main road, and stopped a tuk-tuk and asked for a ride to the train station. The guy tried to give us a high price, and a passing pedestrian, likely seeing how grungy and pathetic we looked, talked the guy down for us. At the station, we purchased sleeper class tickets. Standing room only. It was fine for the 1 hour ride back to Trivandrum. Our plane (I realize that I stick to the present in my writings, so you may not always know what our plans are - but rest assured, we usually had a plan) was leaving the next day, to Delhi. We would immediately leave Delhi and head to Rishikesh. After the lousy night in the boat, I was leaning hard toward luxury. We found a decent hotel, and I talked Joe and Scott into spending the extra \$10 to get a giant room with a big fan. I do not regret this decision at all. The room was very nice. After going out for some pizza at a chain restaurant, we laid under the fan, watching TV and then watching Venture Bros.

Note on Kerala: the mustache-to-man ratio is extremely high in Kerala. I'm not exaggerating: I would say that over 95% of the males who are capable of growing one had one.

For some reason this stop in Delhi is a little hazy in my mind. The clamor and frenzy of Delhi was, again, overwhelming, and we were eager to get out of there as fast as possible. We had a couple options for getting to Rishikesh (which is about 230km to the north, at the base of the mountains that connect to the Himalayas): either take a bus, or hire a car. We had met some women on our first day in India who got majorly oversold a car ride, so we were looking to avoid that. Unfortunately, Delhi was at its most lyingest this day, so we ended up going in circles. We stopped into our old hotel, and got some instructions on how to get a bus ride. These instructions were not very correct, and they didn't totally make sense anyway. We tried to get a tuk-



what is this godless place?

tuk to the bus station, and the guy took us to a cousin's travel agency. We walked off, asked a guy for directions, and he took us to HIS cousin's travel agency (note: these people were lying lying lying). So we got a ride back to the hotel, hopped on a fresh tuk-tuk, and drove through old Delhi and made it to the bus terminal. The terminal looked like a bombed out post-soviet wasteland. Horribly dirty, dilapidated, and confusing. At this point we had five different stories for how to get on our bus. Asking the ticketsellers did not help at all. Basically, the main idea was that we'd have to wait until like 10pm for our bus to come. That's

four hours of sitting at the station. So we sat. Occasionally one of us would wander off to verify the situation, and would pass by people that were maybe loading a bus to Rishikesh. But asking about this yielded no useful data. My best guess about this is that there were different classes of buses. And people just assumed that we did not want to take one of the lower-class, though frequent, buses. Other notes: the station's bathroom was the grossest bathroom of all time. It was a circular, and you'd piss anywhere on the wall. The entire floor was covered in pee, and there was little air circulation. Two people had to work inside it, collecting money from anyone who needed to venture deeper and do a number two. This sounds weird now, but Scott walked in there with his video camera sticking out of his pocket, and filmed it. It didn't come out very well, though.

The bus station, despite looking like the government hadn't checked in on the place in 40 years, actually had trash cans! And there were vendors and people with outdoor cafes who took an interest in cleaning up trash and making their zone look presentable. I bought some bandannas, and Scott bought a calculator watch.

When our bus finally arrived, we got ushered onto the wrong bus by someone trying to get money from us. But then someone else guided us off of it and to another one. This other one was, I think, the same bus line that was leaving like every 30 minutes.

So... we probably didn't need to be at that station for four hours. Not sure, though. It was almost totally full when we got on. We were the only white people. We sat in the very back. We had to sit sideways because there was no room for our knees. The bus was very dirty and claustro. It took forever to leave because the guy was trying to sell every available seat. But he didn't! We actually had a teensy bit of room in the back. Alas, this lasted about 15 minutes. While rolling through the vast suburbs of Delhi, some folks hopped on and squished in next to me (three of them!). This made things sucky. And we had 8 hours of it. Joe slept in the corner. But sleeping was impossible for me. Scott and I watched some Venture Bros, and I put on some tunes for both of us to listen to (Zwischenfall, Wampire, the SNX compilation). These things helped the night pass. Without them, it would have been totally horrible.

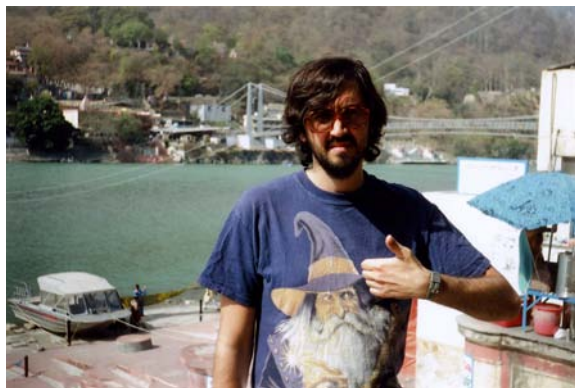
When we got off, the backs of my shirt and pants were dark brown from the bus. It was 5am, Rishikesh. We got on a tuk-tuk, and took it to Laxman Jula, the yoga-tourist area where the Beatles famously hung out. The driver, instead of driving us to where we wanted to go, drove us to his cousin's hotel. We were expecting this to happen - that's just how it is! - so we said "forget you" and walked off. At this stage we were numb to all the lying, and were not trusting anyone. We weren't especially pissed off about it, though. Rather, it just felt absurd and ridiculous.

At 5something am in Laxman, it was still dark. The roads were steep, and winded down toward the Ganges. Every so often some pack mules would pass by, hauling rocks. And, uh, I didn't see the rocks and assumed that the owners were taking their mules on walks for exercise! duh. We were eager to get a hotel. But nothing was open. So we sat and watched the town wake up.



the street of laxman jula

Laxman has two roads, one on each side of the Ganges. And you could get from one to the other by walking over an impressive,



scott thumbs-ups something. can't remember what

though wobbly, foot bridge (note: motorcycles still beeped their way across the bridge - very annoying). Along the roads were open-air shops, restaurants, and hotels. There were a lot of Tibetan items for sale (same as in Yarkala, actually).

I bought a scrollcase, and some other trinkets. The Ganges was large, green, and impressive. It was flowing steadily, coming around a bend down from the mountains. I was expecting it to be gross. But I guess Rishikesh is close enough to the source. Indians were bathing in it (holding onto a rope when they wanted to go deep). Yoga-tourists were everywhere. Billowy, low-crotch pants. We didn't pass the enlightenment test, apparently, as none of them would look into our eyes. They were searching for something greater than what eye contact could offer.

A fair amount of Indian tourists were visiting, too. The Kumbh Mela was happening one town over, so a bunch must have been taking the opportunity to visit this holy town. Also, another type of foreign tourist that I would occasionally notice (throughout the whole trip) was the Anthony Bourdain-type. I saw a couple of them. These fellows were usually tall, middle-aged, with short gray-sprinkled hair, and often French. They had bold, somewhat-weathered features, and deep voices. Basically, they looked just like Anthony Bourdain.



joe "window" shops (these shops had no windows)

This was a nice place to be for the end of the trip. We just had a couple days left. The weather was cooler. And there were lots of fellow tourists. We almost went to a big animal sanctuary, but decided instead to go on a trek.

"Trek" means hiking down a mountain. We were driven to the top of the mountain at dawn. There was a temple at the top, and from it we had a view of the Himalayas in the distance. From there we walked back to town, with a guide. It took most of the morning. It was



joe finds another reason to take his shirt off (I dropped my lens cap into the water... oops)

pleasant enough. But I had to spend most of the time looking down and trying not to slip. For some of it, we followed a small culvert carrying water to rice paddies. We passed by some homes and small villages. No electricity or roads for these villages. The simple mountain life! FYI, I was back in my hole-at-the-butt pants at this point, since my new ones were too dirty to wear. In addition, all of my clothes felt gross and dirty. I was especially pining for some clean socks. My feet felt terrible.

That evening we took a taxi to the Kumbh Mela, in nearby Haridwar. We had passed through Haridwar in the middle of the night on the way to Rishikesh. It had been lit up with Christmassy lights, and there were lots of tents, billboards, and giant statues. Our goal here was to dip our toes in the Ganges (taking a dip is one of the ceremonies at the festival). We figured this dip was a way to "cover our bases" in case Hinduism turns out to be the one true religion. We would get our blessing and be safe (at least Scott and I figured this... not sure if Joe was with us).

At the festival, we passed by an impressive parade. There were whirling dervishes, Naga Sadhus (naked people covered in ashes), and lots of music and dancing. In contrast with their usual conservative behavior, religion



mela fest madness

seemed to provide a safe outlet for Indians to let go and go wild! We went to an area where a bunch of people were getting ready to take dips. Since we were white, it was assumed that we were there to spend money... or something. We were ushered to the water's edge by some people who wanted to give us the total package. But since we were totally over being pushed around, and just wanted to relax and take in the scene, we fled. We went to the other side of the river, where it was way mellower. And we dipped. Still, a young Brahmin character came up to us and provided us with his services. He was a nice-looking guy, seemingly wise and holy beyond his years. One at a time he conducted the ceremony on us. He said stuff in another language, and we did our best to repeat it. Then we dropped a pod of leaves with a candle on it into the Ganges, and watched them float off. Then we had to give him "donations". And then his compatriot put the dot on our foreheads. It felt like a fitting end to the trip. We were blessed. We sat around for a bit longer, watching families dip into the water. And then we left.



your dotted protagonists. phindally done, as they say on those bumper stickers

In the morning we got breakfast. Scott and I ate yak cheese sandwiches from a Dutch bakery. Then we hired a car to take us back to the Delhi airport. This drive took ten hours, and was, as road trips go in India, an endless honk/pass war. It was stressful. We all had our headphones on, and were greatly looking forward to the airport. After the ride was complete, I estimated that throughout the trip I had seen about 20 people squatting and taking shits right out in the open. Entering Delhi, we saw some condo highrises, and malls. We also saw some mega-slums.

In the airport, we ate Subway. I felt at the time that this was possibly a mistake. But we felt like we were safe. We'd made it

through India without getting sick. And now we were one step from getting out of there. Scott and Joe also got some beers and pizza, while I sat and read (*Accelerando*, by Charles Stross... meh). I didn't want to deal with anything. I just wanted to sit, and then leave.

Aboard the plane, we were ten seconds from taking off when Scott said, "I feel like I'm going to barf." My first assumption was that he was worried about flying, or something. But no, he was all of a sudden horribly sick. He spent the next 20 hours of flight massively sick, throwing up in bags and in the bathroom. It was so hellish for him. To be lodged into a seat, sick as hell, with no choice but to sit and ride it out. Plus, it was his 30th birthday (made extra long, since we were flying with the sun). There were times when he was splayed out on the ground in front of the bathroom, throwing up, waiting for it to vacate. SO AWFUL!

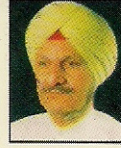
We had been thinking of taking a day or two in Amsterdam on our way back. But, even before Scott got sick I was like, "no way, not into it. I just want to go home." And... about 30 minutes after arriving back in Portland - to the quiet, open streets and sidewalks, the nice smells - I came down with whatever Scott had. I spent the next four days in bed, unable to eat, throwing up, feeling weak and drained. A fitting conclusion, it seemed.

So that was the trip. I didn't write an introduction, and I'll keep this conclusion brief. One thing I would frequently think about throughout the trip was: would my parents be able to visit India and have a good time? I mean, when you look at pictures, and even video, India looks like an exotic, exciting place. But those are heavily filtered representations. You have to factor in smell (shit), sound (incessant honking), and the constant stress you feel when moving from place to place. Scott and Joe and I were able to withstand it, and take the experience for what it was without letting it overwhelm us. It was frequently fairly awful. But it was also at times very interesting and exciting. There is no way to travel in India with experiencing stress, smelling stench, and having to battle against the lies. I feel fortunate to have experienced this part of the world, and I am glad to have had two of my best friends by my side throughout the trip. -Ryan

to see more pictures that I took, go to this ugly url:
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ganatronic@gmail.com - <http://blueskiesabove.us>

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Mahinder Singh
Fine Artist & Designer

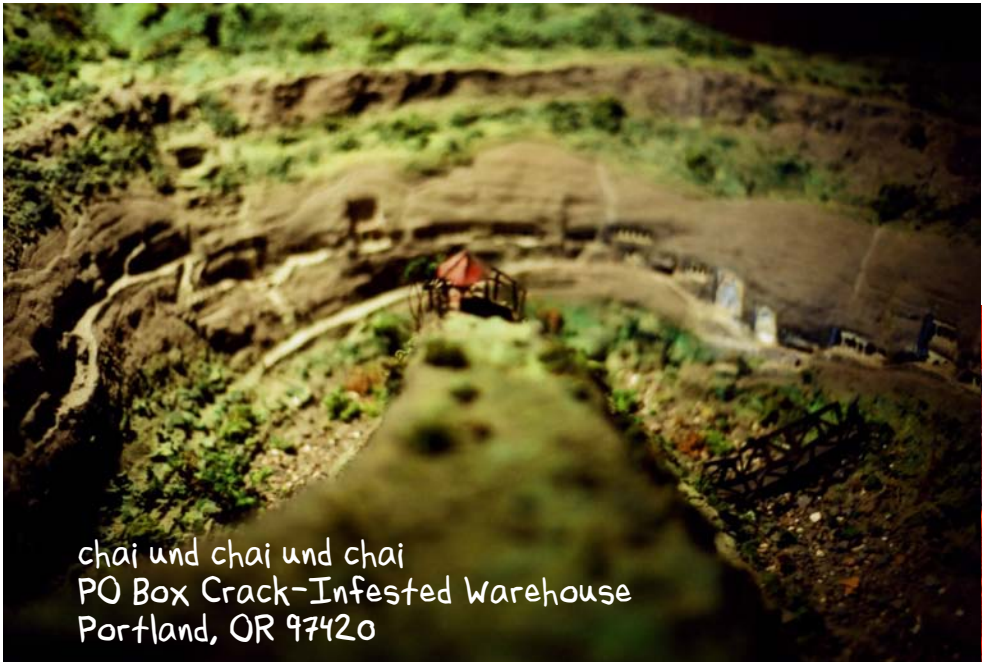
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Thanks for reading. Now... I dunno, go out there and travel



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