

KRET Report

I would like to address this report primarily to a future traveller. If you are thinking of coming to India, you must understand that my first view was smog. The factories had burst over Delhi and from my airplane, the city was masked in a twinkling nebula. India had been draped chastely, and it was on the lips of everyone: driving bans, factories, ashen streets. At the home of "D", I'd write down thoughts on the trip to come, nervous of the foggy days that would reveal themselves in a post-mortem journal. Within the chatter, it held a soft mystery.

If you want to see India most clearly, do so by train. I cannot stress this enough. At home, I get a general anxiety about catching trains. In India, I have screamed. Stepping onto a carriage of peeling paint and picture-words -- at the mute insistence of an armed policeman -- there's that slight fear that you have committed to the wrong direction, like an arrow fired backwards. Perhaps this is a risk: I don't know a transport system more populated than India's. I am sceptical anyone could decipher the endless steel guts into a textbook fit for biology, and I am more sceptical that anyone would take their time explaining it to a gora. I will tell you just to reserve a seat online and days in advance, leaving at least two hours for your train, making sure to pack good and long books. Travel overnight to save money on hostels. A sleeper class is, roughly, three pounds, and if you are lucky, you will sleep. In the mornings buy chai and enjoy the view.

The first train we took was to Orcha, hoping to leave the smog of general Delhi. We were leaving from Agra in a hurry. I cannot recommend Agra but it is inevitable because it is a quick drive¹ from Delhi and the Taj Mahal is there; so you will que hours for it and see everything through a crowd of people, leaving tired and telling yourself it was worth the exorbitant, racist pricing. We were not even lucky enough to half-see it, because the smog was still so thick. And at Orcha, I got bad news and I took a misty walk with "D" and became blessed by a naked Jain and a Hindu and Sufi. So I decided, against any kind of news or smoke, that the trip would be good.

After we left Agra the smoke cleared and the trip was very good. I would like to thank the people at the Kempson Trust for helping with that. The trip was also very long: five months. I do not think I could tell you everything that happened. I will say only that you should take a train to Orcha, and try and find a certain Naga Saddhu at the Shiva temple. Spend a while there, but make sure you begin and start to leave around January, otherwise you'll be burnt bindi-red by the time you're South. After Orcha, we volunteered in Ranthambore. I was an art teacher. The children were sweet and told us of their favourite English books -- they were all terrible romantics. If you have an interest in tigers, you should go here -- we were given a free safari by the school. Although it's unlikely you'll see a tiger and the other safari animals are the kind you'd find in a garden, it is worth doing because all of it is beautiful. Ranthambore Fort is nearby too. It is guarded by monkeys. You should be careful around monkey always, because they are much smarter than you. There was a parade in Ranthambore before we left. The princess came through in a procession of elephants. I caught a marigold and did not see her very well. But I am sure she is beautiful. It is even more unlikely you will see the princess. When she convoyed to town, we were all the safari.

We took a jeep to Jaipur for a literature festival. I met a young Brahman boy who was a writer there. In India, you will come across several conmen. They will do their very best to charm you and they are as sweet as anyone else. The boy was not a liar but he was a terrible writer. We left Jaipur shortly after but I would like to say that I liked the "Pink City" best in the old centre, were it is pink. If you go

¹ I say "quick" rather generously, I had to vomit several times. Avoid water that has not been sealed.

to India you will be surprised at the colour palette. Everything should be ugly, but it is not; colour has a logic of its own, and the ugly complement each other in very thoughtful ways.

Later, we drove for a long time to Jaisalmer. It is by Pakistan and the military have built wonderful road to invade it; if you fell asleep on the way, you would find yourself suddenly aglow in a thick desert, where buildings are carved from the sand, slotting and slipping into towers and homes like the slow dunes. I liked Jaisalmer very much, firstly for its name, but also because of a long Mughal lake that you should hire a boat for. The only issue is rabid dogs. In general, avoid dogs, unless you are in the mountains. The mountains calm everything.

In the north of India, around Rajasthan, we went to several other places, all linked easily by train. Udaipur – the lake city – is pretty, but rather romantic – think Amsterdam crossed with Venice. Restaurants built on top of restaurants to tower for the view of the lake; and if you are not careful, you will find yourself dining on rickety wood. Don't go alone. A man plays music by one of the rivers with an instrument I will never hear again. If you find him, do me a favour and buy his album. I had no money and I would like to hear it again. The Ajmer Sharif is gorgeous – it is a small sanctuary of Suffi temples swallowed up by a filthy network of streets. Suffis are very kind people, if you visit here, wear a hat and cover your hair. Try and listen to their Qawali music. For some Suffis, God is music. I think that God is Qawali music.

Eventually you will have to come to Mumbai, most trains go through here. It smells always of rotting fish and has a style reminiscent of an Indian L.A. You can act as a gora for a Bollywood movie and some tourists make good money doing this. Before you arrive anywhere, always make sure you have a reservation booked. Rickshaw drivers will go as far as saying your hostel has burnt down – they do this for money and money is especially important in big cities like Mumbai. It is the only place where the drivers must use a meter, and it is the only place where you might have to fight to use it. Everyone, coincidentally, is a horrible driver. Near Mumbai are the Ajanta and Ellora Buddhist caves, in Aurangabad. The history of India is extreme. Aurangzeb is one of the most villainous and complex characters within it. Both the caves and his castle are something you should see. Give a day for each attraction.

At this point, our small group split up a bit. E had gone to the beach in Goa and we went to see her. She was very sick. It is always sad to lose a friend but India is a hard place to travel. There is a lot of noise and chaos and dirt and it will infect you. We said goodbye to E and did not spend much time in Goa. It is not really India but there are lovely Portuguese basilicas in the main city.

We were now in the South. Compared to the North, things are, obviously, different. Our friend, O, from Delhi, was rather shocked – it was a different country to him. The standard of English is much better, as rather than the prominent Hindi of the North, people are raised on a number of first languages. The food is better too: less spicy, more coconut and cream. It becomes easy to relax for too long, but you shouldn't; spring here becomes unbearably hot. Gokarna is probably the closest thing to paradise I've found. It was an old beach that was drawing a big crowd and everyone was convinced it was about to be ruined, apart from the Israelis, who were mostly ruining it. I had a lovely time and I hear it is awful now. The way the best beaches in India work is inherently secretive. You should talk to a lot of people and avoid the big names – there will always be enough people in any stretch of sand. A bit inland, and there are some Hindu temples that rival Angkor Wat. We drove to southern tip of India mainly just to say we did it and came up to a hill station called Kudai. I think I spent fifteen pounds over that week and it was one of the best fifteen pounds and seven days of my life. Go hiking and lie down, the clouds will roll straight through your face.

From the Tamil mountains, we drove to Hampi². A place that is, literally, something else - the desert there has sunk down over the centuries and unearthed an ancient Indu city. Boulders will perch on dunes impossibly. There is an elephant in the main temple that has been trained to bless tourists. Holy cows – which you will see in every possible climate of India – thrive in painted lines of ochre and lime. From Hampi we headed back to Mumbai and took a plane back north, to Varanasi, a “city of thieves and fools”, and one of the holiest areas of India perched around a filthy Ganges. We came here primarily for Holi: the festival of colour, where celebrations can take a much darker turn. A few of our female companions were groped, and, in Varanasi, women will never leave their homes for the celebrations – but they will happily pelt you in paint. Marijuana is temporarily legalised by the government and will be sold as “bhang”, which tastes, apparently, like dirt. There is a general trend to drink heavily, and some people will begin decorating tourists and friends in paint a day or so early. Most actions (or crimes) that occur during the holiday will be written off as part of the festivities, so be careful. Having said that, it is a unique experience, and with a bit of care, is a messy way to forget a day. Later, we went to the burning ghats. Dying by the Ganges is believed to allow you entry into Nirvana, and though funereal, strangely relaxed. I saw a man laugh with his burning relative, and then more, a family joking and guffawing to a supine jawline, melted to bone, like one snowy cap of the holy Himalayas.

From Varanasi we were picked up by a friend, “J”, and taken to Bihar, the home province of “O”. It has the unfortunately undeserved reputation by many Indians as bandit infested. Although we were lucky enough to travel with a guard – at the insistence of one of the many people who believe infested -- the most threatening thing I saw were hornets. If you have an interest in Buddhism, I’d recommend you visit here – Buddha’s grave and site of enlightenment are an hour’s drive away and draped in rainbow flags. His first lecture at a deer park in Varanasi is not too far either. From Patna, a once thriving city reduced now to thin bricked houses, we were able to venture out and even see J’s old village. Hundreds of children poured out of their houses to watch us eat their goat curry. It was delicious and it was my birthday. Alcohol had been banned on the same day – a bottle of whiskey was smuggled in for me.

There is a land border from Bihar into Nepal, but the roads take a significant downgrade upon leaving India. Customs is confusing, and you will need a variety of permits and Nepali money to enter. We drove through the dark Nepali woods into Kathmandu. There was no electricity there, or lamps to guide our way. Our trees seemed to sway and open for our passing car like the thistles of a brush. At the crumbly mountain roads, smoke rising from the tires, stars and city lights mixed. It is probably very dangerous.

There is a number of things to do in Nepal but to do it, you will be walking. There are no trains and no airport. Roads are barely roads. Consume many momos and gather your strength. If you go on a hike, pack a generous amount of money or you might die somewhere remote. Be very careful about the buses you take too: we went to Lumbini for Buddha’s birthplace and it reinforced the mantra that life is suffering. One of the most important things you should do, is to talk to others. This sounds simple, but around friends, it is easy to forget. Talk to locals and talk to travellers. They will tell you things you will never find. After our hike, D and O said goodbye, but I had met someone to go East with, back into Sikkim, India. It was much nicer this way.

² Train stations in the South are less connected but taxis are always cheap. As with all things, the going rate for a tourist is much less than a local, but haggling can save you small fortunes. A bit of “tora tora” in the right place, and just plain resolve, is essential. Between three or four people, you could hire a car for the individual price of a twenty minute London taxi.

We shared a taxi and went to Darjeeling. India has a large domestic tourist industry and many come here for the tea and cold weather. Me and my friend, "S", were barraged incessantly with demands for pictures. There is a slightly bizarre obsession with goras by many Indians. At first, these things are funny. After a while, it is annoying. Some can be very rude and you have every right to tell them to go away. We began to charge cups of chai in return, and our modelling contract left us with a supply of warm tea and dangerously cheap rum, which is delicious mixed. Heading into Sikkim, I was reminded more of Nepal than India. Tourists need a permit and the culture is very homogenous – the majority are Buddhist and were only recently taken by India. It is, however, a remarkably clean and green place – this is, in fact, the unofficial mantra of Gangtok. Hiking and taking our time, S and I travelled mainly by bus in loops around the capitol. Our final destination was Calcutta: the old seat of the British Raj and a lovely city under a now proud Bengali culture. I ate only street food and picked up the book, "Farewell Song" by Tagore. If you go to India, or visit a good shop, keep an eye out for it.

When I arrived back at Delhi, to see O and D one last time, I saw things a little different. From a nervous landing, I felt almost local, swaying in a kurta and looking around as a bright coloured foreigner. Although I do not like this idea of "finding yourself" or any of that hippy nonsense, I'd like to return onto the fog which seemed to follow me for my first few weeks. It was fitting, because I knew so little about where I was, or what I would do and what, even, my blank pages would say. And I think, if you were to come here, you would find a similar smoke. In a country of paradox and titles, I don't think that fog will ever lift. But in all the hot air I wrote up, I had at least one Indian clarity: things will happen that we will never expect, or plan for. With a little faith, a fear becomes mystery. I'm grateful for knowing that – even if it is not knowing much – and I am grateful for the people at Kempson too, who've waited patiently on a rude and mysterious report. It all works out in the end.