

SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

An (Indian) Whistle Stop tour

HAVE you ever been on a Whistle Stop tour where you didn't have the time to whistle, never mind stop? Well, that's what I have just experienced in a mad nine days in the world's second largest country, India.

I was there for several reasons – to take in a cricket match (after all, this column is all about sport!); to see the much vaunted Golden Triangle (a bit like the Bermuda Triangle except that you don't disappear in it); to visit a Rotary Project in Jaipur but most importantly of all, to catch up with my son, Patrick. Patrick has been working in Northern India for the last four months. Delhi to him must seem a bit like a small village because it contains only 20 million people, his previous place of employment (Tokyo, for a year) has the world's largest conurbation – 38 million.

Mind you, when I arrived at New Delhi Railway Station and emerged into the throng, it felt like there were 38 million people in front of me, including a few hustlers but I was ready for them – did they think I came up the Ganges, sorry, the Roe, in a bubble?

By this stage, I was strung out as I had been travelling for two nights. I left Limavady at 30 degrees Fahrenheit to go to Delhi at 30 degrees Centigrade. The mid-night bus from Derry to Dublin airport struggled to get the heat working. I was dressed for Delhi not Derry, mind you, is it London Delhi or just Delhi?!

I arrived, far from fresh faced and bushy tailed into Terminal 1 in Dublin at 3.30 am and I had 6 hours to kill before my first flight. I was travelling on Finnair because I wanted to spend a

night in Helsinki on the way back. For some mysterious reason known only to Finnair, my scheduled flight was cancelled and the only chance that I had to see Finland's Capital was in a three hour window between flights on the way out.

Fortified with two hours sleep but with my usual curiosity burning, I got the bus from Terminal 2 in Helsinki (I was going from Terminal 1 in Dublin to Terminal 2 in Helsinki to Terminal 3 in Delhi, I just hoped there wasn't a Terminal 4 anywhere!) downtown to emerge blinking in the gloom at the main bus and railway depot.

I could now officially say I have visited all five Scandinavian countries – the others of course being Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Iceland.

LIMAVADY COOL, HELSINKI COLD

Limavady may have been cool, but Helsinki was cold. Maybe my blood was just a bit thin with precious little sleep.

Maybe it was because I didn't actually have a coat so I decided to walk fast to get the blood circulating. The locals were unfailingly polite when I asked for directions and their English was better than mine – doesn't it make you feel embarrassed?

I had 120 minutes and four things to tick off. First was the Church of the Rock, a church hewn out of granite in a cylindrical shape which not only served as a place of worship but also as a concert venue due to

its amazing acoustics.

Next, was the equally iconic Chapel of Silence, a totally wooden Church which only holds 100 people built in the middle of a shopping square. Its slanted smooth wooden surface had to be seen and touched to be believed, then it was a quick march down an expensive shopping street – such places always bring me out in a cold sweat!

Then it was the Esplandi Park to the shores of the Gulf of Finland which stretches east and south towards Russia, Poland and Germany.

A smooth bus ride took me back to the airport where I tried to warm up in the executive lounge before boarding a super A – 330 bound for Delhi. My seating companion was a lady from Denmark who went out to India every three months in the winter for heat and to soothe the soul (Exotic Marigold Hotel perhaps?)

On a long haul flight, you get fed like a battery chicken which reminds me of a flight between Moscow and St. Petersburg pre Glasnost where I saw a chicken in a cage on the owner's knee, maybe tomorrow's chicken soup?

I maybe grabbed two hours sleep in total so I was running on fumes and seeing things that weren't really there. It was fantastic, however to see Patrick in my hotel. He had a shower there. When he said he had used more water in that four minutes shower than he had in the previous month, I realised how low to the ground he and his girlfriend, Cath had been living.

FOUNDER OF MODERN INDIA

We headed immedi-

ately to the house where the founder of modern India, Mahatma Gandhi lived and died – taken out by an assassin's bullet after India gained independence in 1948.

I have been to Strawberry Fields, the memorial garden in New York City where John Lennon was slain. Both are full of peace and of sorrowful memories.

Then we took our lives in our hands and commandeered an auto rickshaw. This is a motorised three wheeler usually driven by a madman with a death wish who has a constant fear that his horn doesn't work so he had to pump it every 30 seconds. The best way to cope with being on the back of one of these vehicles is either to pray or just close your eyes.

Invariably, you arrive at your destination in one piece only having to part with less than only a £1. A pound goes a long way there and there are 75 rupees to the pound. Post Brexit, the pound didn't lose too much to the rupee.

Theresa May knows the importance of trading links with this engine house of over 1 billion people. India is one of the so called BRIC countries, the other being Brazil, Russia and China. The first two seem to be dropping back but the last two are forging ahead building, selling, buying, tooling up their economies for the challenges of the 22nd Century. India also wants to be a world powerhouse in relation to sport.

We next went to Lodi Gardens full of 16th century Muslim temples where we had a cup of chai from a mobile tea seller. He takes his own kettle and fire to work so he

can conjure you up a brew at a minute's notice. The squirrels played on the wall of the temples oblivious to their beauty.

Some 30 minutes and another insane trip later, we were in the Muslim shrine of Nizadden where we walked down a myriad of tightly packed corridors to arrive at the Holy Place and where we sat cross legged (it was disrespectful to sit with your legs straight).

We listened to the Temple musicians as they sang and beat their drums, hundreds of birds cart wheeled in the dusky evening air above us and it was easy to see why the Beatles were moved and inspired by the land of Maharajah and mystics, where religion and promises of a better after life (whether you are a Muslim, Hindu or Sikh) to suffuse the air.

If your kids are sleeping on the street underneath flyovers and millions of you are existing on a dollar a day, you would have to believe that, wouldn't you? At least if you have a ticket for the lottery, you might eventually win it one day.

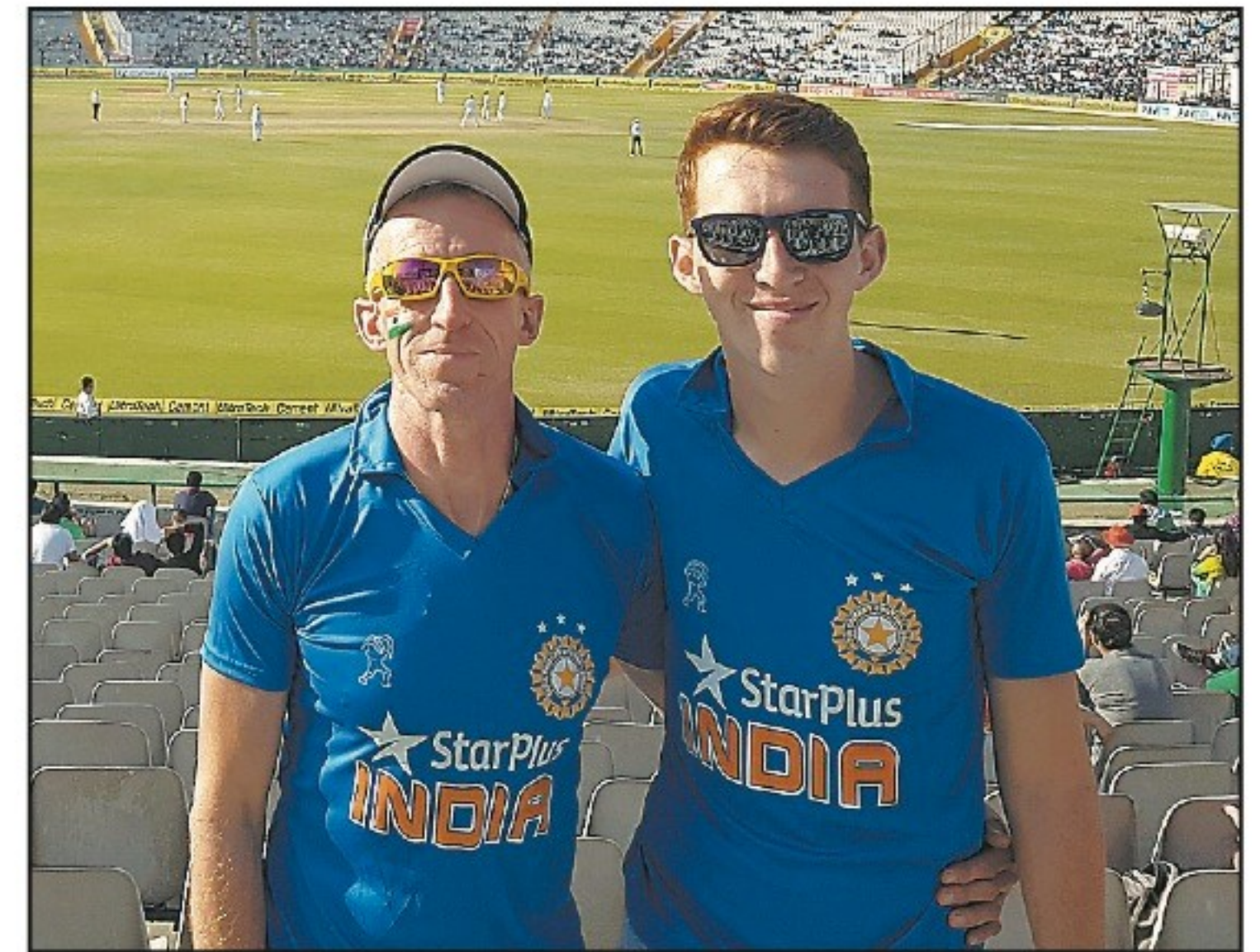
COMMEMORATE THE DEAD

Our next trip was to India Gate, built to commemorate the dead of both world wars. This massive arch reminded me of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin and the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

We sat in the footpath and bought some momos, a very tasty cooked blended combination of flour and vegetable, from a street vendor and watched the world go by. I was to refrain from meat from nine days on the grounds that I would have less chance of falling ill, this meant no meat, no salads, no unwashed fruit, bottled water only and using sanitising gel a lot.

We walked down the straight processional avenue which is Champs-Elysees style, for several kilometres before fighting our way onto the most crowded underground train in the world – Paris, London, New York, Beijing, eat your heart out. We also had to fight our way off – maybe it's safer in an auto rickshaw after all!

My first day was complete with a meal in a rooftop restaurant overlooking the busy bus lane street market below. It was a bit like the main square in the middle of Marrakesh, the hustle and bustle beneath you with all of



PJ and PJ soak up the atmosphere at the Third Test India v England match in Chandigarh. NCL50-38s

life's rich pageantry on display.

The next morning it was down to the International train station at 7.00 to catch the 7.40 to Chandigarh. We were on our way to watch the cricket. India were playing England in the Third Test. The first Test had been drawn, India had won the second and England had a chance to make amends before the last two tests.

Ever since I was a kid, I have always wanted to travel on a train in India and now I had the chance.

Our first journey was a mere four hours. I was in the luxury of executive class, the ticket had cost a whopping £12.00 and I had the unbridled luxury of one of the railway employees serving me food on about four occasions during the journey – this was included in the price of the ticket. We had a cup of tea with each course and biscuits, then Roti (like Nann bread, though not as thick) and all sorts of other delicacies which I couldn't name but which served both as breakfast and lunch.

To make it even better, we were given three or four newspapers each – in English! That was my idea of heaven.

FAR FROM HEAVEN

Meanwhile, outside my window a lot of people were far from Heaven and were living a life of Hell. I saw women in saris and kids whose job it was to pull stones off the tracks and hopefully remember to get out of the way when a train hurtled by at 50 miles an hour.

Our train was huge with countless carriages, I hadn't seen any trains with commuters on the roof –

yet! There were quite a few tourists like me on the way to the capital of the Punjab for the cricket.

We arrived after 11.00 am and Patrick quickly negotiated a good deal with an auto rickshaw guy to take us to our hotel – Regal by name but not by nature! We dumped our bags then headed off to the ground.

In case there were riots, the Punjab Police were there in force in their Sikh turbans and dapper beards – in army style uniform and carrying big canes, they were imposing but friendly.

We fought our way to the front of the queue to buy tickets for the game on the Sunday but realised that when we were there, it was only mid-day, we might as well get inside for the same money. It turns out you could buy a ticket for five days of test cricket for 600 rupees, that's about £8.00, not bad for five days of international sport!

What I know about cricket can be written on the back of a small cocked hat. I have been to the WACA in Perth, a Sheffield Shield game. I have been to Durham for a Division One County Championship game. I have even been to the Hunter Memorial grounds to watch Limavady play but I don't really get cricket. Is this because our attention span these days is just limited to 90 minutes? We can all just about concentrate for the length of time of a football match or a rugby match. Most films now don't last more than 90 minutes, after that the attention span of a gnat kicks in.

Cricket is a game for those of patience both for players and spectators. The players have to retain

concentration for seven hours a day for five days in a row, probably one of the many reasons why Wayne Rooney isn't a cricketer....

I talked to a few locals who obviously all wanted India to win but had a soft spot for Alistair Cooke, the England Captain.

The Indian hero, meanwhile, was Captain Kohli – he is the Ronaldo of the cricket world with his swash buckling style and his flashing blade.

He knocks the ball imperiously all around grounds all over the world and when an over was, well, over, huge screens on the ground that normally showed action replays of the cricket now showed ads for cars and drinks featuring you have guessed it, Captain Kohli!

When he came out to bat on the Sunday, there was a frisson of excitement in the air. People stood up all around the ground, they were rapt with attention, they started to chant his name. This guy has star power by the bucket load and he puts the 'C' into charisma. Apparently, he has 13 million Twitter followers, 9 million Instagram followers and 32 million likes on Bookface!

I was disappointed he didn't make a century but he did make 62 to steady the listing Indian ship which had been chasing the English overnight total of 286. It looked as though England had left quite a few runs out there, because as the experts said, the pitch was excellent for batting.

Join me next week to see how the cricket match unfolds and to discover if there is more to sport in India than just cricket!



The swash buckling Indian cricket team captain, Virat Kohli prepares for battle. NCL50-24s