

SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

Golden Triangle!

I was in northern India to visit my son and we were at the Third Test between India and England in a place called Chandigarh.

Chandigarh doesn't have much going for it other than the cricket ground and the cricket ground doesn't have much going for it other than the fact that they play cricket on it. The city is a bit like Canberra as the streets are laid out in a grid fashion and all the districts were numbered which made getting around very easy. A rickshaw driver's life in Chandigarh was fairly uncomplicated compared to his peers in Delhi.

There have been two world famous cricketers from the area who have played for the national team recently, one was a batsman called Singh and one was the legendary Kapil Dev of whom even I have heard of.

England may have had the 'Barmy Army' there but some of the locals painted their torsos in the Indian colours and waved flags the size of a double bed sheet.

Meanwhile the 'Barmy Army' weren't all that barmy, probably because Johnny Bairstow was dismissed before a well-earned century and secondly, there was no beer on sale. Alcohol was fairly hard to come by in the Punjab and it was a no no at the ground. I thought that the Punjab Cricket Association could have tripled their profits if it wasn't for the Temperance Rules!

The three of us, however, managed to enjoy the great Indian beer, Kingfisher, the night before in a most remarkable shopping area.

The succession of stylish shops could have graced any big city in Europe. There was also a

traffic free square with DVDs of movies on sale that hadn't even been released yet. We headed back for an early night as sitting in the sun all day watching cricket and drinking Mountain Dew can be tiring!

Catherine and Patrick often had complete strangers come up to them and ask them for photos. Cath, being blonde and Patrick being red haired, stuck out like sore thumbs. They had been teaching in a place called Barnala, then they worked on a farm in the foothills of the Himalayas.

They have travelled a lot including to Armritsar, home of the famous Golden Temple which it is the duty of every Sikh to visit once in their lives - a bit like Muslims at Mecca in Saudi Arabia. They were used to the rhythm and the pace of the place. If the train was late, you just shrugged your shoulders - no point in stamping your feet - you just went with the flow.

After a year being based in Beijing and then a year in Tokyo, they had used their free time to travel all over China and Japan and were now doing the same in India. Their entire possessions were in their rucksacks. I admired their sang froid and their adaptability greatly. Hopefully one day, they will even come back to base somewhere vaguely in the same time zone as their respective parents.

Back home we have a habit of saying that the world is a small place. Patrick and Catherine know that it's not.

After a second day in the sun at the cricket, we left the game dramatically poised (with one over to go) so that we could grab a rick-

shaw, this time driven by a twinkly eyed, impressively moustached driver who was carrying a knife in a scabbard round his waist. If he asked for a tip, we weren't going to deny him!

After packing our worldly goods on our shoulders, we then gave our three match tickets away to some local kids who would hopefully be able to use them. We had other fish to fry, starting with the sleeper train to Delhi. We had a couchette each which was very well appointed.

We would be back in Delhi after midnight to search for our hostel before an early start in the morning to visit some more magical sites of India's capital before the highlight of the trip - the one and only world renowned majestic Taj Mahal!

Monday November 29

This day last year, I was in Tenerife dealing with hospital authorities, the British Consulate, Spanish undertakers and an insurance company following my mum's death. I know that she would be pleased that I was with Patrick today, seeing what makes him tick, walking in his shoes.

We left our hotel (£12.00 for a funky room with subdued blue lighting) to go and change some money before breakfast. Thankfully I had brought some sterling and euros with me because it was impossible to get near an ATM. The ones at the airport had run out of cash and anyone in town that did have cash had a very frustrated and angry crowd of about 100 disgruntled punters in front of them.

People were paying other people to go and queue for them.

This was because the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Modi, decided to get rid of the black market and money laundering overnight and he banned the 200 and 1,000 rupee notes. All he seemed to be doing was depriving people from getting access to their own money. That's why a lot of Indians who were queuing up at the bank called him ATM - All Time Modi.

We got breakfast - bread and Dahl and black coffee for the four of us - for £4.00. Patrick's friend from England, Stephen, joined us and was in good form despite 5 hours of jet lag. It takes a day to get rid of one hour's time difference so by the time I was over it, it would be time to go home again!

Our first stop was at the Islamic shrine called Jamil Masjid, a compound with arched entrances where the Court Yard can hold 20,000 people for prayers and we clamoured to the top of the steep winding set of steps to have one of the few views of Delhi from the height. Unfortunately, due to the smog (an increasing problem in India's big cities), we couldn't see too far!

Our next port of call was a Jain shrine and their symbol is the one that Hitler stole and converted into the dreaded swastika. Devotees here would buy a handful of rice from one of the temple acolytes, go to one of the many holy relics, say a prayer and throw some rice around. Because we had to take our shoes and socks off to gain entrance, we would find grains of rice later between our toes...

Next up on our tour of world religions was a Sikh temple where the devotees were very welcoming, even to unbelievers and where they allowed us, not only to sit down and listen to the music that was being played live but also, they allowed us to partake of a free lunch as we sat on the floor and a bloke filled up our steel plate with food.

What a fantastic philosophy - feeding strangers for free - I am a big fan.

Indian bureaucracy
Next port of call was to a Post Office to post a package and it gave us a chance to sample Indian bureaucracy. Mission eventually accomplished, we were off to the Metro Station.

Although it was after 2.00 in the afternoon and not even rush hour, we were rammed in a car-

riage. It was a great method of transport but not as much fun as the bicycle rickshaw which we tried for the first time. It cost 40 rupees for two of us to travel several kilometres.

Back home, I ride my bike for fun but lugging around two well fed Europeans like me and Stephen didn't seem too much fun to me for our poor beleaguered driver.

We ended up at Connaught Place where the architecture reminded me of Royal Crescent in Bath. The buildings were equally imposing and surrounded a lovely park which, as it was a Monday, was shut! I was able to go and buy an Indian GQ for £2 to compare it with the UK edition.

We fought our way back to our hotel in streets not much wider than a footpath but which we shared with bicycles, rickshaws, dogs, motor bikes (I would even see later a wild horse and a rat the size of a cat in Jaipur) pedestrians, school children, cows and even a mouse which somehow dropped from the sky, landed on its feet and scurried into a hole - now you see it, now you don't....

Then it was off to the madness that was the railway station via a street hawker where we bought some food for the journey before boarding the 5.25 to Agra. The trip cost £2 and wasn't quite as salubrious but at least we got a seat.

Every two minutes, sellers of chia and samosa and even some book-sellers would announce their presence in the corridor in the same way that sellers of the Belfast Telegraph do on the streets of Belfast - loudly, often and indecipherably.

I grabbed some zzzz's as we trundled out of Delhi and headed south east. We were leaving the bit of India which is squeezed between Pakistan to the west, China to the north and Nepal to the east down into Udder Pradesh.

A snap shot of Indian life was on display on the narrow corridors of the packed train. Patrick told me that eunuchs - the lowest caste possible in India - would often board trains, slap males across the head and threaten to strip to embarrass them if they weren't paid to leave - only in Incredible India!

To complete our Whistle Stop Tour of the world's religions, we had earlier seen a statue of Mother Theresa. It was situated near Lawyer's Row where every Lawyer sets their stall out on a

side street near the Court House, touting for business with not a single ambulance chaser in sight of course!

We had earlier walked through a bazaar which concentrated on shoes and I also spotted an old Ambassador car and a Royal Enfield motor bike, two of India's finest ever products.

Taj Mahal!

Awake at 4.30, we were out of our hostel marching to one of the world's eight man-made wonders, the one immortalised by Princess Diana when she posed for a photograph which graced front pages all over the world. The shot of her on her own on a bench with the legendary Taj Mahal in the background emphasised her loneliness and the gulf that had arisen between her and Charles and her complete isolation.

A few weeks ago, William and Kate posed at the same spot, this time in happier circumstances. We also wanted to get there but we would have to cope with several thousand tourists from all over the world, including the contents of a USA cruise ship whom we met in the queue. These guys had travelled from Mumbai which was at least 1,000 miles to the south - they were keen!

The owners of the mausoleum and mosque which is basically what the Taj Mahal is, earlier this year decided to increase the entrance fee - by doubling it. The fee was now 1,000 rupees - £12.50.

When a cup of tea costs 12p and a night in a hostel costs less than the entrance fee, you question it but then on the other hand, you are not going to turn down the chance to see this amazing building which took 20,000 workers 22 years to build. It was completed in 1653, it commemorates the Mughal Emperor's favourite wife who died delivering child number 14.

I can't remember when I was as last excited about seeing a building. I know nothing about architecture but we ran in like school kids when they finally opened the doors just before 7.00am and sprinted through a Court Yard flanked with minarets as the call to prayer was still being heard faintly in the background, under a reddening sky. Then we suddenly saw this gleaming marble edifice soaring from a raised plinth and rising up to the heavens, majestic, magical, mystical and oh so memorable.

Patrick reminded me the night before that he and I had been to four of the world's man-made eight wonders, i.e. The Great Wall of China, The Colosseum in Rome, The Pyramids of Giza, Petra in Jordan and now the Taj Mahal would now make it five and I got to wondering if I could tick off the other three in one fell swoop (Christ the Redeemer in Rio, Machu Pichu in Peru and Chichen Itzi in Mexico) but hey, one step at a time!

In the meantime, we just watched the queue grow for Princess Diana's bench. All eyes, however, were on the building at the other side of the lotus pool.

We sat and gazed at it, we walked round it and gazed at it, we

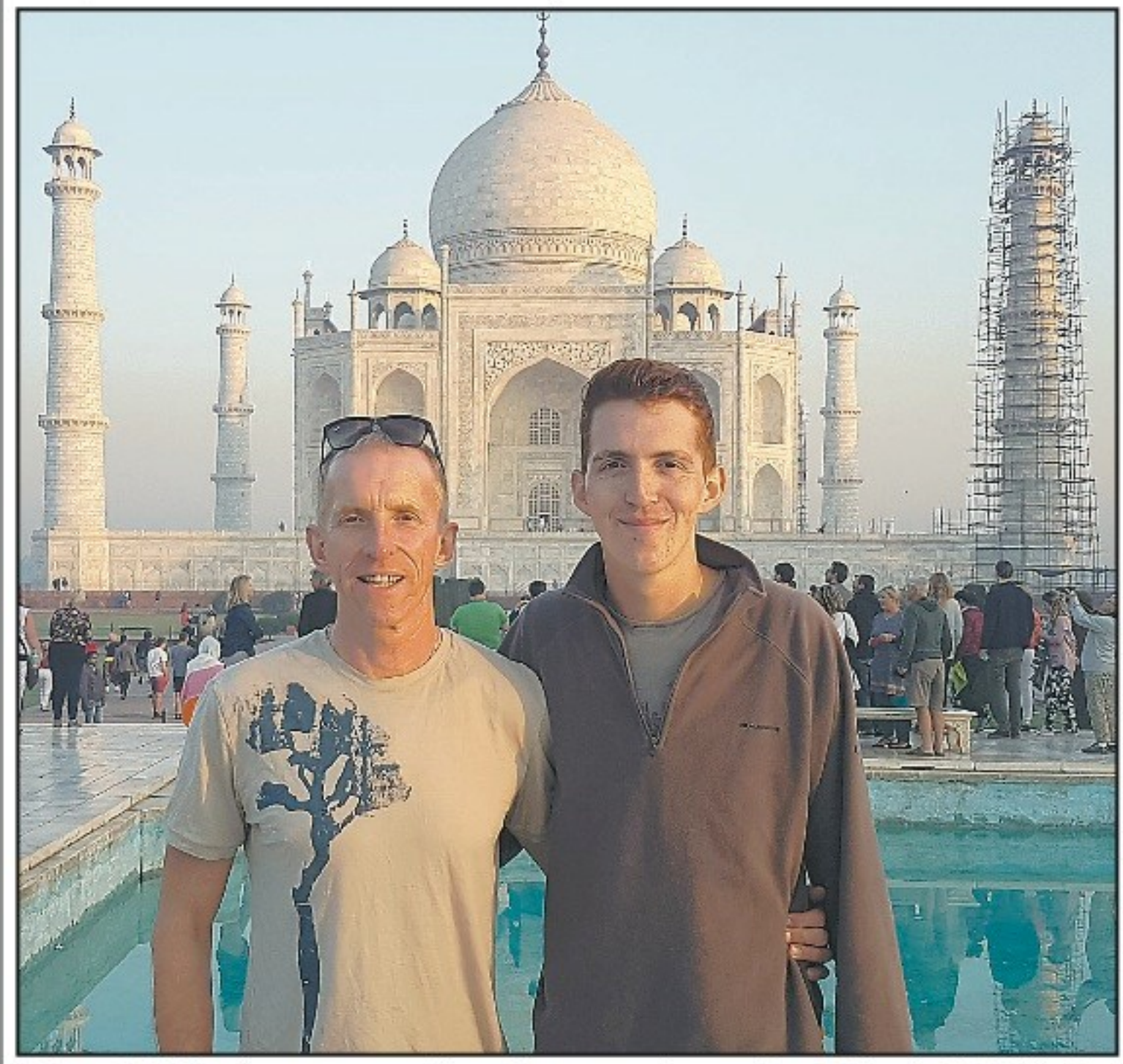
walked to the side and gazed at it, it was just a visual feast. The setting helped of course but the lines were so clean and the building just drew your eyes like a magnet. I even got some additional views and photos from a mosque on the western edge of the Court Yard.

After we walked through the mausoleum itself, we emerged overlooking the river and I spotted a guy wearing a Comrades sweatshirt. This is a race in South Africa which I have entered for 2017. It's a mere double marathon. The first 20,000 only entrants are accepted. It's live on South African TV - one year its 52 miles up to Durban, the next is 52 miles downhill from Durban. It was good to gain some insights from an experienced finisher. I said goodbye to my new Belgian friend and we sat dumb struck in awe and wonder in front of this architectural marvel.

Even Prince Charles would agree it was not a "monstrous carbuncle."

Here I was at the Taj Mahal still thinking of sport and still dreaming of next year's target i.e. Comrades. Eventually, after 3 hours, my comrades in arms, Patrick, Cath and Stephen and I, left thinking life doesn't get much better.

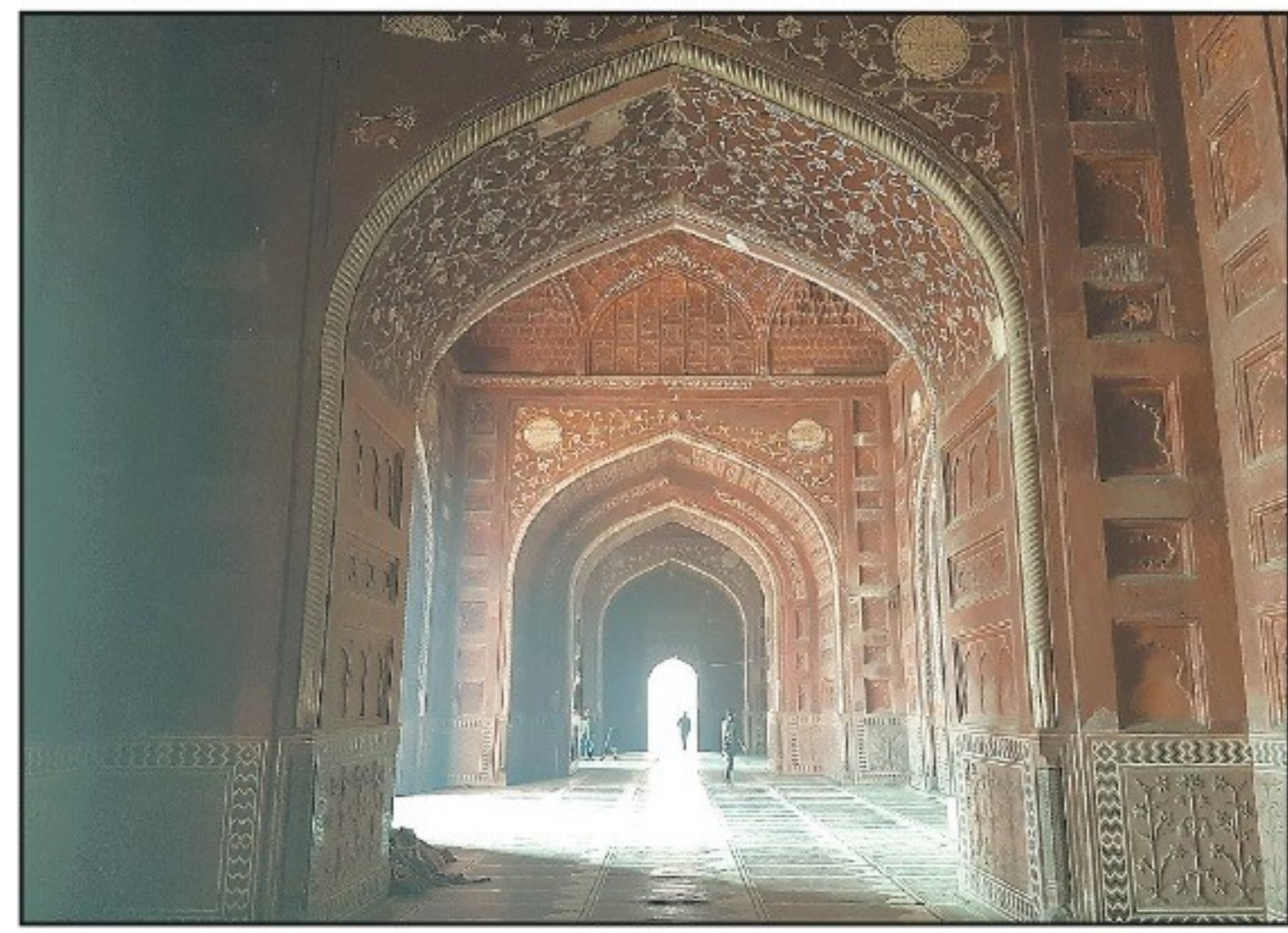
Join me next week for more sport in India!



PJ and PJ feeling spiritual at the magnificent Taj Mahal. NCL51-02s



'Comrades' in arms. NCL51-03s



Stunning Indian architecture. NCL51-04s