



# Does sport matter in India?

I was in Northern India visiting my son, Patrick and we eventually dragged ourselves away from one of the eight man-made wonders of the world, the Taj Mahal and then went to check out the Red Fort, another astonishing building which gleamed in the mid-day sun.

Inside were several court yards all blissfully calm away from the madness outside the four walls. The Fort is situated with a perfect view of the Taj Mahal and to complete our trilogy of views, we went later to the Murgh, a park not mentioned in any guide books - Patrick and Catherine having sussed this out on their last visit here a few months ago.

For 200 rupees, we were able to lie on a perfectly manicured lawn, do some yoga, rest and recharge the batteries and have yet another view of the wonderful Taj.

We had a variety of all rickshaw drivers during the day, some more suicidal than others. At one stage, an entire herd of Brahmin bulls were just walking aimlessly down the equivalent of a dual carriage way. No one - whether it was the cows or the drivers of the lorries, buses, auto rickshaws or trucks - batted an eyelid.

Somehow the four of us and four rucksacks all got in and all got out and arrived at the Agra Railway Station. This is the bit I was dreading, saying goodbye to Patrick.

He and his companions were on Platform 6 awaiting the Bullet train back to Delhi before boarding a 15 hour bus to the far North where they were going to climb to 3,000 metres in

the Himalayas. I was on Platform 2 heading on the sleeper train to the last stop on my Golden Triangle tour, Jaipur. I embraced Patrick and looked forward to seeing him in Exeter in a few weeks time.

I met a lovely Spanish couple and an English guy called Sandeep in the sleeper train and we swapped stories as the train pulled out of the station. It was a bit like Platform nine and three quarters on the Hogworth's Express. It was a mixture of surreal and real, of fantasy and fact, of myths and legends.

I was on a 5 hour journey to where one of Rotary's best ever projects was based.

## JAIPUR

Jaipur is the capital of Rajasthan. Even the name conjures up images of Moghuls, of Emperors, of a land before time, of elephants being used as transport, of punkah wallahs.

My hotel room even had a shower but again no hot water, however you were always helpfully provided with a big plastic bucket. So you filled that instead and threw it over yourself - job done and look at the time you have saved!

Today's Hindustan Times told me that David Cameron was coming to address a major conference in Mumbai next month. I also learned that the

Pakistani Junior Hockey team was denied, or didn't apply for in time, (whichever version you believe) Visas to play in the World Cup in India; India easily beat England in the Third Test. Although I was watching it only three days previously, it already seemed like a life time ago. A lot of water had flowed down the Ganges since then.

The next day I met with Sandeep who was English of Indian origin and was coming back to the land of his parents' birth, retracing his origins.

He had last been here 24 years ago at the age of two and he remembers swimming in the fountains at the Sikh Temple of Amritsar. He had commandeered a taxi all day so the world was, if not our oyster, our japati. The total cost for us for the day with driver and car was £12.00 each...

We set out first for the City Palace which Sandeep visited and I contented myself with a relaxing pot of Masala tea in a Court Yard beside a pool of cool water. We then walked to Jankar Mantar, an observatory founded in 1734. It had 16 marble time pieces and are incredibly accurate at telling the time to the nearest 20 seconds. Jaipur is 27 degrees north (as opposed to our 55 Degrees) and our guide was able to show us the exact time according to where the shadow lay on the sculptures.

Indians are big believers in the connection between astronomy and astrology. These marble wonders would look fairly cool in the Country Park in



Kabaddi, the national sport of India. NCL52-07s

Limavady but wouldn't work for 10 months of the year as they are dependent on the sun....

We saw the Pink City and then it was off to the Amber Fort, 11 kilometres north and blissfully in the quiet countryside. It was nice to escape the crazy crowds for a few hours, however as this was the peak tourist season, over 8,000 tourists a day visit the Amber Fort.

It was established in 1652 and it glows amber in the strong sunlight. It was the centre piece of a lattice of fortresses and ramparts which were built on the contours of the hills and which, if you did a double take, could have been the Great Wall of China. We got a tour from a guide who knew the history of the palace inside out. The views overlooking the man-made lake, as it shimmered in the heat, were just stunning.

On the way back, we stopped to view the 'floating palace' of Jal Mahal which defied logic. It just seemed to sit and float in the middle of the lake.

Meanwhile on land, a 10 year old girl was performing a tight rope walk above a grim faced mother who was collecting cash from the crowds as dad kept the rope, upon which her daughter's safety depended, taut. She should have been at school instead of risking life and limb but she was feeding her family instead.

On the road behind, a brightly painted elephant with a mahoot on board was plodding towards town. Every

vehicle on the road deferred to him, no matter their size (it wouldn't look good on an accident insurance form - "I drove into an elephant while my gaze was diverted by a 10 year old tight rope walker who was performing in front of a jewel of a floating palace....") - All in the day of a life in Rajasthan.

## CARCINOGENIC PRODUCTS

We stopped for a well-earned beer but had to put up with smoke in the bar, carcinogenic products not having yet been banned in public places.

I changed money with a bloke up a back alley whom our driver knew. The queues for the ATM were still lethal and the papers were warning of a financial time bomb with people about to get their monthly pay into their bank and wondering how to actually get their hands on their own money.

India, as a country, next year celebrates its 70th birthday with Independence Day on August 15. It has its problems and it's easy to criticise its drivers and its safety record but what other country, according to one leading expert, has produced such economic growth, a liberal democracy and a redistribution of wealth and justice? It still has a long way to go, but it has achieved more in 70 short years than most.

On the sporting front, they have world leaders at cricket and hockey and of course Kabaddi, the national sport and it is interesting to see that ex-pre-

miership players like Diego Forlan and Aaron Hughes, the Northern Ireland International, are now plying their trade in the Indian Premier League.

Meanwhile the National Cricket team have just gone three up against England. A sticky wicket for England but a comfortable position for Captain Kohli for all and his all-conquering bunch of heroes. If you want to make it big in India, either pick up the cricket bat or take acting lessons - the second highest paid actor in the world is from Bollywood!

You may well think that Indian drivers are the worst in the world. When an auto rickshaw driver tried to tell us that four of us weren't allowed in his vehicle which was less than half the size of a mini, with our four rucksacks and four other bags etc for safety reasons, I had to laugh as a rickshaw with seven people in it promptly flew past us...

I have seen an entire family of four on one single motorbike with none of them wearing a helmet. I have seen motor bike riders texting as they drove. Every kilometre, I saw the potential for about 15 accidents and you think these drivers are the worst but then you realise that they could also be the best.

They have an innate sixth sense and spot danger before it occurs. They know how to weave in and out, how to share space on the same carriage way with a Brahmin Bull, an auto rickshaw and dogs wan-

dering nonchalantly across the road. The worst job in the world however would have to be a traffic policeman in Delhi - your nerves would be shot after 5 minutes looking at the mayhem on all sides....

## BUS STOP BLUES AND VIEWS

I woke early and was in the gym for 6.30am. It was called 'Kleanfit', one of a small franchise with a branch in Delhi too. I wanted to get on a bike machine and treadmill so I could say I ran and biked in India. I guessed it was safer inside a gym!

When I was on the weights bench, one of the proprietors came over with his mobile phone camera. I thought he wanted another selfie but no, he wanted a shot of me working out so they could use it for promotional purposes. I tried to look suitably heroic but yet humble. A superstar, moi? I could practically hear Tom Wolfe's 'Bonfire of Vanities' being quietly read in the background. I called it a day after an hour, posed for a selfie with all the PT guys and staggered across the road. It was a perfect gym session - arms on fire, legs on fire, lungs on fire.

After brekkie on the rooftop terrace, I went for a stroll to a local bus stop and did something which I rarely do - sat down for 20 minutes and used my eyes as opposed to my mouth and what sights I saw!

Apart from the usual chaotic traffic, I saw an overloaded tuk tuk stop, three woman wanted to

get on so the guys who were hanging on the sides and standing on the running board got off so that the girls could be squeezed in, then one bloke stood on the back bumper and held onto the roof before the vehicle spluttered back into action, belching out black diesel smoke.

I also saw a motorbike pull up and stop and two beautiful girls in their yellow saris clambered onto the back of the bike with their lustrous black hair blowing in the warm breeze, unencumbered by anything silly like helmets; I saw a woman walking past in a fleece as it was only 25 degrees; I saw lots of lorries bearing the manufacturer's name Tata, (Mr Tata is one of world's richest men and makes Richard Branson look like a barrow boy); I saw an auto rickshaw pull up and a woman squeeze into the front then pull her four year old off the middle of the road so he could stand in the footwell; I saw a bus pull up and guys jump on as the bus was still moving; I saw a bicycle with a cart attached to it, on it sat several bags of produce and a woman, probably all set for the market; I saw a packed rickshaw stop and a hand shoot out to help someone aboard.

The hand that reached out didn't care if the hand of the potential passenger was Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian or Jew, it was the hand of friendship - come aboard and let the journey begin, this is Incredible India my friend!



Northern Ireland International player Aaron Hughes is now playing in the Indian Premier League. NCL152-06s