

Letter from Beijing

March 24, 2005

Hi Everybody,

We spent the last two days in Chengde. It was the first place we've been where NO English was spoken. My Mandarin isn't much but it sure does help :)



We took the train up—I managed to buy the tickets at the main window in the Beijing railway station, something the guide books say not to even attempt. I did OK except that I got hard seat tickets rather than soft seat. We came back by soft seat. Melinda's

comment was "Soft seat rocks." She said she also regretted not getting a picture of me in my yellow jacket negotiating at the window, surrounded by smaller people in black clothes trying to push their way in. (Yes, they really do try to push in front of you. I used my best St. Paul's tuck shop maneuvers and held my own.)

The view from the train was amazing. I suspect we could have seen the same things any time in the last 2,000 years. Peasants tilling the fields with hoes. A few, very few, sheep and goats, no tractors, no cars, just wheelbarrows and big baskets on people's backs. And that was next to the train tracks. Imagine away from the train.

Chengde itself was outstanding. We marched up to our chosen hotel with no reservation and managed to get a room for \$30, a 40% discount. We probably paid about 100% too much. The hotel was inside the grounds of the summer palace and some of the buildings went back to imperial times. So did our bathroom.

The temples were amazing. One looks like the main palace at Lhasa. They were built to impress visiting dignitaries from the western parts of China. On the second day, when we visited the summer palace it turned bitterly cold and snowed. It was quite



a sight.

Today we had a tour of Beijing University (Bei Da) with Michael Dundas. It's a beautiful campus and you'd think it would be a wonderful place to study until you realize that the students live six to a room with triple decker bunk beds and no bathroom. You

have to go to outside bathrooms that charge you for a shower—1 kuai, about 12.5 cents.

We also went to see Mao. You never know if you're seeing the real thing or a wax copy. It's sort of a shell game. The impressive part was how serious the Chinese—and, apart from us, there were only Chinese—were. Most bought flowers outside, all were silent and respectful. The flowers went on a table inside the entrance in front of a statue of Mao. When it got overloaded, an attendant cranked a handle and the flowers disappeared inside the table. Melinda and I both decided that they go into the basement where they are sent outside to be sold again.

Tomorrow we're off to the Wall, then on Saturday to one or other, or both of the Beijing Summer Palaces. On Sunday we head for Xian (Change from our original schedule. We've decide that 25 hours plus of train to Datong and then Xian is probably not a good idea with my bum ankle/hamstring.)

Much love to all,

Dad/Bill



Letter from Xian

March 28, 2005

Hi Everybody,

We are now in Xian. It's hard to know how to even begin to describe a Chinese city. First, there is almost nothing built before 1950. That makes it sound as though we are in a modern city, which is far from the case. There are huge modern buildings but most of what you see are shoddy, broken-down, concrete structures. The dominant color is the gray of the local brick. It is also incredibly dusty, dirty and polluted. It's the end of the dry season now and everything is covered with a fine layer of dust. The sun looks red in the sky and you can't see very far because of the dust and smog.



The traffic is also beyond belief. The main rule of the road is "I'm bigger than you, so get out of my way." Trucks, buses, cars, motorcycles, motorized tricycles and bicycles all make turns through red lights in either direction without pausing. If you

don't get out of the way they'll run you down. Crossing the street is a blood sport. The only saving grace is that nothing moves very fast.

Then there is the street scene. If you walk one way from our hotel you see small, open shops - almost stalls - selling chemical equipment and supplies. If you walk the other way there is a maze of food stores, fancy new jewelry and clothes stores, street food, construction, people parking on the sidewalk and everywhere you look, huge numbers of people. The Chinese are very aggressive on the street and in queues. If you don't assert yourself they will walk right over you or cut in line, without the slightest compunction. On the other hand, if you ask a question, they can go out of their way to be helpful—even to the point of giving you an answer when they haven't a clue. Today we asked for the location of a bathroom, misunderstood the answer and were wandering around looking lost. The woman we'd asked came running across a

courtyard in high heels to set us straight. (In our defense there was a sign that pointed to a "Star-quality toilet" in the direction we were looking. The actual toilet was star quality but it was in the opposite direction and had no sign.)

The Chinglish is a constant source of amusement. Would you like some "Monopolistic cent green food?" No, I didn't think so.

So why would anyone want to come here? When you first reach a city you think, oh my God, why did we bother with this. Then you seek out one of the attractions such as the Forest



of Stele we saw this morning. This is an entire library of books carved into huge stones and collected in an old temple. Once you go through the gate you are in a beautiful, peaceful space with green plants, flowering trees, beautiful buildings and

a real sense of peace. You can't believe that the chaos is still there outside the gate. And the things you see are spectacular. This afternoon we went to the Mosque, which is a cross between a Mosque and a Chinese temple. The minaret looks like a Chinese Pavillion; they have records carved in stone that go back 1,000 years. All of it was an amazing mixture of Arab and Chinese.

The attached picture is from a little park next to the main intersection in Xian. The building in the background is the Bell Tower and dates from early Ming days. The city walls here are also Ming and were built on the foundations of the Palace walls from the Tang dynasty. The Tang walls were several kilometers further out. It's hard to visualize how huge everything is here. 2,000 years ago this was the largest city in the world.

Bill/Dad



Letter from Shanghai

March 31, 2005

Hi Everybody,

Well now, Shanghai's a completely different story. No more abandoned, half-finished buildings; no more dust; no more trucks playing Jingle Bells spraying water on the streets; no more buses announcing repeatedly "public car, public car, public car..." (In Chinese.) Instead every intersection has a traffic warden who yells at pedestrians, bicyclists, motorcyclists, or anyone else who tries to behave normally and cross against the light in the middle of a torrent of traffic. The recipients of this abuse look quite startled.



This is a beautiful city. The Bund—the old waterfront area with 1930's deco buildings—is spectacular. There is a wonderful walk along the Huang Pu river with flowers and trees blossoming and a tremendous variety of ships and barges going up and down the river.

One of the attached photos is taken from the roof garden of the Peace (ex-Cathay) hotel. Our guide book says that the European owners of the hotel traded their ownership claim to the Chinese government for exit visas in the 1950s. At the moment it still has all the original Art Deco in place but it is a very sad, rather dead, government-run monument to what doesn't (or didn't) work in China.

Warning. You aren't going to believe the following account but I swear it is the literal truth. We went to see a troop of acrobats this evening. They went on with marvelous acrobatics for about an hour and a half. I suspect that you would not see quite a number of the stunts in a developed country because they were too likely to injure the performers. One girl lay on her back and supported six stacked up chairs with her legs with another performer on the top. This hole edifice was constructed one chair at a time with the second performer on top the whole while. Now for the part you won't believe: The final act was held in a

steel mesh sphere about 30 feet in diameter, which had been on the stage throughout the performance. It consisted of first one, then two, then three, then four motorcyclists riding in circles both



vertically (like a meridian line) and horizontally (like the equator). Their motorcycles had lots of flashing lights and they had to go really fast to stay in place. At one point two riders were going vertically and two were on the equatorial path. I was busily figuring out if the

sphere was well enough supported to stay on the stage if there was an accident - we were in the front row. I'm still not sure. There were some safety wires hooked to the cage in the rear but I'm not convinced they would have kept it in place. Besides you had to wonder what would happen to the fuel in an accident. I was quite happy when it was over.

The second picture is of the street (Nanjing Dong Lu) in front of our hotel. We sat in a HagenDazs ice cream store having ice cream sundays after the acrobats. Rather good sitting in a store belonging to a New Jersey company with a Danish-sounding name, in Shanghai, watching the world go by.

Bill/Dad



Letter from Hangzhou

April 3, 2005

Hi Everybody,

China never ceases to surprise. That's certainly a trite idea but we are finding it disconcertingly true. Yesterday we took a day trip to Suzhou by train. From the train window we saw a distressing landscape of modern light industrial factory buildings; leftover abandoned heavy industry; canals and fields full of trash; and small plots of land, still being farmed, mostly planted in rape. The modern housing built for the factory workers was astounding. Row upon row of identical, pink and white apartment buildings covering several square miles at a time—I am not exaggerating. It looked like a scene from the War of the Worlds with an army of Martian apartment buildings marching on the railroad. If this was modern China, then perhaps it had best been left undisturbed.



Suzhou was a typical Chinese city. Full of noise, people, drab buildings, traffic and hustlers. We were greeted at the train station by the most feared word for a Western tourist: "Hello,...." This can be the introduction to a pitch for postcards, 'Rolex' watches, rickshaw rides, invitations

to come see the local students' calligraphy exhibition, or simply begging. The beggars are truly pathetic. The trouble is that there are so many of them and, if you give one of them something, the rest descend on you en masse. Suzhou had a variation on this theme. At the station there was a posse of legless men on square roller boards. They pushed themselves along using brick-sized wooden blocks. If they managed to reach you they would grab your legs and hang on until you paid ransom. I saw them coming and ran for the sidewalk, figuring that they would have a hard time getting over the curb. (Thank goodness, no handicapped ramps.) Melinda accuses me of fading into the distance while she was attacked.

Speaking of handicapped facilities, after two and a half weeks in china, I've finally figured out why every sidewalk seems to have a section with two-inch by one-inch lozenges set into it forming a path. These are to allow the blind to navigate. When you get to an important building,

there's a little path off to the side, towards the door. This seems like quite a good idea. They run down into the Metro stations and even into Macdonalds.

Suzhou is famous for its gardens and silk industry. We visited a couple of the gardens and found them somewhat contrived for our Western taste. The highlight of the day, however, was taking a taxi out to the Precious Belt bridge, which crosses the Grand Canal a few miles out of town. The taxi driver had to stop twice to ask directions and once we got there all we could see was a wall leading down to a side canal. Once we skirted the end of the wall, however, there was the bridge. Built in the Tang dynasty (about 7th or 8th century), it has 153 arches with large arches in the center so that boats can get through. The canal was full of traffic. Much bigger and busier than the French canals. The bridge was beautiful and there wasn't a person, let alone a tourist in sight. I suppose the tour busses found it to hard to reach.

Overall we were quite glad that we were heading back to Shanghai the same day. The prospect of spending the night in Suzhou didn't appeal. Since Hangzhou and Suzhou always seem to be mentioned in the same breath (that tradition began with Marco Polo, who liked them both) we were rather concerned that the two nights we'd scheduled in Hangzhou might be a little much. On the train ride down, however, we were pleasantly surprised to find that the countryside was clear of garbage, the fields were neatly tended, the mass housing was varied in design and had architectural features that were solely for display (turrets, peaked roofs and other decorative features). We could have been looking at some sections of Northern Virginia. We don't know why there is such a contrast between the two areas. Perhaps the local government in Hangzhou simply functions better than that in Suzhou.

The town itself is a delight. It reminds me of the Italian lakes. There is a beautiful promenade around West Lake, a fleet of ferries and row boats on the lake itself and gorgeous mountains in the background. The mountains come in a dozen shades of gray that the photo doesn't begin to capture. It's also Sunday, so there are about a million people walking around the lake.

Two days here in a brand-new Hyatt Regency, with a room looking over the lake sounds very nice. It will be like a small vacation.

Dad/Bill



Letter from Guilin

April 8, 2005

Hi Everybody,

China is a little like the sideshows at an old-time circus: What you see isn't necessarily what's really going on. Here in Guilin, there is a beautiful street market full of people selling local produce. Stacks of tangerines, oranges, taro root, baskets full of eggs and lots of other things we couldn't identify. This seemed pretty straightforward until I went for a walk early this morning and noticed a woman taking eggs out of perfectly standard cardboard crates and stacking them in her wicker basket. These weren't eggs fresh from the local hens. They came from a factory in some unknown location. Probably the same was true for much of the produce we saw.



Yesterday we took a boat trip down the Li River to Yangshuo. This passes through some of the most spectacular scenery you could hope to see. The trip is about 50 miles and takes some five hours. Then you get a little time in Yangshuo and take a bus back. What the guide books don't tell

you is that close to 40 boats make the trip every day. Each holds at least 100 tourists and they all leave at 8:30 in the morning. It's a huge procession down the river. Actually, it's rather fun, like being in a parade.

Part of the package is a lunch on board. This is cooked in a kitchen with a huge wok on the stern of the boat. For a little extra money you can buy fish delivered by local fishermen on the way down the river and have that added to your meal. The fishermen work from bamboo rafts and they manage to come alongside the boats, which are travelling at least 6 knots, and grab hold of the rail up near the bow. Then they slide astern, braking all the way, until they come to rest in a position to deliver their fish. Of course, some of them are there to say "Hello..." and sell you carved wooden Buddhas. We saw one such boat missjudge a wake and capsized, cargo and all. The crew didn't seem too

disconcerted.

In Yangshuo we arranged to take a little motorized trolley out into the countryside. This was a beautiful area with steep, limestone karsts rising out of flat rice paddies. You'd think you were deep in the Chinese countryside, except that anywhere you asked to stop to take a picture, at least three or four women would arrive on bicycles to sell postcards within seconds of your stopping. They must have been stationed every few hundred meters along miles of dirt road.

Postcards, like everything else, have very flexible prices in China. You can pay 10 RMB apiece in Shanghai, or you can get 10 for 10 RMB from the trolley-ride ladies, or you can get 10 for 3 RMB near the parks in Guilin. And that's before you start to discuss what the price really ought to be. We have paid from 1 RMB (12 cents) up to 25 RMB for a bottle of water. (The later, admittedly, was in the dining room of a fancy Western hotel.)



The state-run enterprise isn't quite dead, either. This morning we went to one of the public parks, which charge a small fee for entrance. Invariably, you buy your ticket at a window and then take it to a gate to have it "checked" before you are allowed in. OK, so that takes two

people where we would have used one. But in this case, we arrived right after a tour guide with his charges in tow. It took him about five minutes to buy his tickets. This involved checking his guide's license in a printed book to verify that it was in a legitimate form, multiple rubber stamps, and a form that was filled out by hand in quintuplicate. Once it was filled out and handed over, the guide had to check each copy separately. Now perhaps you think I'm just being impatient. Why couldn't I simply wait my turn. Well, there were two ticket windows and five people behind the windows. Some were having a nice chat. One was

Letter from Guilin *(continued)*

April 8, 2005

sitting in front of one of the windows trying to work out why her ball point pen wasn't working to her satisfaction, one was eating an orange. Then the ticket checker came in to see what was going on and stayed to catch up on things inside. Finally, once this was all over, we got to pay our 20 RMB for two tickets and go into the park.



This evening we fly to Chongqing. This is one of the largest cities in China - the "administrative district" has 30 million residents - no that isn't a typo. Apparently they have instituted a ban on the use of all automobile horns. I'm not sure I understand how Chinese traffic can function without

horns. It will be interesting to see. We have a transfer arranged as part of our Yangtze cruise, so at least we won't have to play taxi roulette at the airport. (In Guilin they wanted to charge us 100 RMB for the trip from the airport to town until we told them "da biao," - run the meter - at which point they gave up and let some junior driver take us for the metered rate of 45 RMB.)

Bill/Dad



Letter from Hong Kong

April 16, 2005

Dear Patient Readers,

I think I left off with a taxi story. Here's another: We arrived in Guangzhou late at night after a long day in Yichang and a delayed flight. After bypassing all the taxi touts in the airport we went to the head of the queue outside and asked to go to our hotel. The taxi driver told us that it would be 150 RMB. We said no, he should run the meter—first in Mandarin and then in English and with gestures. He continued to insist that it was 150 RMB so we got out of the cab and were in the process of getting our luggage out when a uniformed official (police? army? airport guard?) came up and asked us, in perfect English, what had happened. Once we told him, he had a somewhat heated conversation with the driver and then indicated to us that we should get back in the cab. By this point we would much rather have taken a different taxi, but we weren't about to cross the official. The result was that we had a very silent, very fast trip into town for 53 RMB on the meter.



Guangzhou is the most polluted place I have ever been. Even worse than the London fogs of the 50's and Budapest in 1981. A thick haze hangs over the city. It's a choking, raspy sort of air that makes it really hard to breathe. We arrived just before the April trade fair. Our hotel overlooked

some of the fair buildings. One announced that it was the home products section of the fair. At first it just looked like a rather large convention building. Then I realized that it went the better part of a quarter mile back from the street. Around the corner there were more, even bigger buildings. In the lobby of our hotel we saw Western business men ordering shoes from catalogs by pointing.

The elevator was a compromise between the British and American systems of floor numbering. The bottom level was 'G' but the next level up was '2'. When you reached the 'G' level, the

indicator over the door showed floor '0'. I watched as a young Chinese woman stood and looked puzzled at the indicator for at least fifteen seconds before deciding it had to be the right floor and getting off. Our hotel in Shanghai, by the way, had a 13th floor but no 6th floor. This was a bit of a mystery since six is supposed to be a lucky number in China and four is the unlucky number. (Because the sound for four only differs from the sound for death by a tone.) I couldn't find anyone to tell me why six was missing. It was a German-run hotel, so perhaps six is unlucky in German? Or maybe the owners are prudish and it sounds too much like "sex?"



We are now back in Hong Kong after spending a full four weeks on the mainland. When we first arrived in Hong Kong we were amazed at the higgledy-piggledy shops full of exotic foods; now they look like models of orderliness and paradigms of cleanliness. What a difference a month can make.

Yesterday we took the hydrofoil to Macau. The contrast with Hong Kong is interesting. Both the English and the Portuguese arrived to trade and both seized islands at the mouth of the Pearl River. The English on the east and the Portuguese on the west. The Portuguese brought the Jesuits and religion along and the English brought opium. Now, Macau is a backwater supported by gambling and Hong Kong is a world financial center.

Macau still has a lot of colonial buildings and the facade of one of the first Christian churches built in the Far East. (The church burned down in the 19th century.) It was constructed by Jesuits with the help of exiled Japanese Christians after they were kicked out of Japan. The facade is fascinating. It is covered with mystic symbols. The Virgin Mary is in the center and she is surrounded by a frieze of flowers: Chrysanthemums for Japan alternate with peonies for China. There is a multiheaded dragon; a skeleton; a

Letter from Hong Kong (continued)

April 16, 2005

snake; palm trees; spirals; a Portuguese galleon; and other symbols we couldn't identify. It is both simpler and more mysterious than most churches.

In Hong Kong, we are in a hotel on the south end of the Kowloon Peninsula, overlooking the harbor. There is a promenade outside the hotel, on the water. It's a popular spot in the evening because the city stages a light show using the neon on the buildings on the other side of the harbor. It's rather amazing to see all these buildings lighting up and changing colors in time to the music.



Last night we were out on the promenade a little after dark. We noticed a crowd along the railing and a couple of police boats moving up and down searching the water near the sea wall. Pretty soon an ambulance and several more police

boats arrived. Apparently somebody had committed suicide by jumping into the water.

We fell into conversation with a man who had been living in Los Angeles and was back to visit his mother. He said that Hong Kong was a very difficult place to live and that there was a suicide almost every day. One of the factors he cited was the fact that property values fell 70% in the Asian financial crisis a few years ago and haven't recovered very much even now. Of course, the NASDAQ fell 70% too, but that just points out one of the big differences between China and West. Here, there is a tremendous burst of hyperactivity. New buildings, factories and roads are going up at a rate that is hard to believe. But, this modernity is still very much on the surface and is extremely fragile. When something goes wrong, there is no depth of resources to fall back on. If the Hong Kong property market falls 70% that is a catastrophe that leads to suicides and still causes problems eight years on. If the NASDAQ falls 70% we are upset, but we have lots of other resources to draw

on and the problem is a lot less severe. And Hong Kong, of course, is light years ahead of the mainland.

Tomorrow we are off to India.

Oh yes, the photograph is of a sign on the exit door from the arrivals area at Yichang airport.

Bill/Dad



Letter from Delhi

April 20, 2005

Gentle Reader,

Incredible India! That's what the tourist office posters at the airport advertise; for once the advertising hype is true, although, perhaps not in the way the authors intended. Just as a taste of how things work here, we arrived at the hotel at around 3:30 AM; checked in and were given the key to room 2203. We proceeded to the room and tried the card in the door but found it wouldn't work. We were just about to go back to the desk when the bellhop arrived with our luggage. He assured us it would be "no problem," he'd get the master key, which he did. When he opened the room he put his fingers to his lips and announced in



a stage whisper that somebody was already in the room. Then he closed the door and we all skedaddled to the elevator. It turned out that our room was 2003, not 2023. They'd made the key for the right room but written down the wrong one for us. What the occupant of 2023 thought is not recorded.

The Lonely Planet suggests that it may take a couple of days to acclimatize to Delhi. That sounds about right to me. We've been here two days now and we've finally made it from our hotel to the center of Connaught Place, a distance of about 1 kilometer. Connaught Place, I should explain, is a very large concentric

set of three roads with a park in the middle. The buildings are beautiful Regency colonnaded colonial style built by the British when they constructed New Delhi in the twenties and thirties. The first morning, we set out for a walk and thought we'd go have a look at Connaught Place. By the time we got to the outer side of the outer circle we were so frazzled by the experience that we turned tail and headed back to the hotel. On a second foray, I got to the same place by a slightly less harrowing route but still couldn't bring myself to cross the torrent of traffic in the outer ring. Finally this afternoon we got all the way to the center and even visited the underground bazaar on the far side.

This part of Delhi is like something out of a science fiction movie. The city was built by an earlier, technologically advanced race and is now occupied by their descendants who have lost the skills that were needed to build and run the place. The streets are elegant, broad boulevards with shade trees and sidewalks. But the sidewalks are not for pedestrians. They are for parking, dogs, kiosks, repairing motorcycles, holes (I mean big holes, ones you could fall into), trash, markets, dogs, monkeys, arguments, touts, oh, and did I mention dogs? The result is that the streets are shared by trucks, cars, motor rickshaws, motorcycles, bicycles and pedestrians. Crossing a street, any street, is almost impossible.

Then there are the various forms of touts. No matter which direction you walk from the hotel, there are sure to be three or four helpful individuals who will inform you that (1) the direction you are headed doesn't lead anywhere, (2) the market is over in the other direction, and (3) you ought to ride there in their motor rickshaw or let them guide you. If you decline they are sure to tell you that they don't want money and then follow you for several blocks. We finally figured out that if you walk on the right hand side of the street it makes it harder for the rickshaws to follow you since they are supposed to drive on the left. I've been very tempted to try my Chinese on them. Perhaps tomorrow.

There are also beggars. Often they are pitiful children who point to their stomachs. Or mothers carrying children indicating that they are hungry. It may well be true but the guidebooks and the locals say not to give to them. Make a donation to charity instead,

Letter from Delhi (continued)

April 20, 2005

if you want to help.

You know that you are in a difficult place when McDonald's has a uniformed security guard at the door controlling who can get in. Actually, I was a little surprised to see a McDonald's. Up till we found that - in the ritziest part of Connaught Place - we had seen very little of the usual American presence. No Haagen Dazs, no Starbucks, no KFC.

The labels on the plastic water bottles here all tell you to crush the bottles when you are done. This is so that they won't be scavenged and refilled with tap water, or worse.



The Bazaar at Connaught Place was pretty interesting. It was about the size of the Istanbul Bazaar but nowhere near as elegant. It was filled with local people looking for bargains. It is laid out like the twisty turny

passages in the early Adventure computer games. We came out about two blocks from the point where we went in. Luckily we'd were next to the Regal Cinema and we'd spotted that earlier, so we knew where we were.

From our hotel window we can see an empty lot filled with construction material and squatters living in tents. There were also tents pitched in the Rajpath - the big fancy road from the Viceroy's palace to India Gate. We were told that they were for soldiers who provided security when Parliament is in session. We've also seen people living in wooden crates on the sidewalks.

The city is a bit like a zoo. So far we've seen dogs, cows roaming the streets, goats, chickens, and monkeys. The monkeys were in a tree over a kiosk that sold fruit. Several men were on the

roof of the kiosk and of a neighboring building. The men had cricket paddles and were trying to chase the monkeys away. No doubt they'd been stealing fruit. The men were shouting and banging their paddles against the trees and the monkeys were screeching. This whole scene was completed by the vultures circling overhead.

The attached picture was taken from our hotel room this afternoon. Connaught Place is in the center of the picture on the far side of the radio towers and occupies a good portion of it. As you can see the air is a little polluted. Perhaps it will take three days to get really acclimated.

Bill/Dad



Letter from Jaipur

April 23, 2005

Gentle Readers,

Lets see, we were in Delhi talking about the touts and motor-rickshaw drivers. They are extraordinarily persistent and aggressive. I tried speaking to them in Chinese but apparently I don't make a very convincing Chinaman. It didn't even slow them down. So then I tried Swedish. That worked much better. Some of them look puzzled and then fade away. Some continue for a few more sentences and then say, rather plaintively: "English?" One enterprising fellow asked me what language it was but didn't seem to be enlightened by the reply: "Det var Svenska." If any of them had but known, I doubt that there are very many speakers of Swedish who don't also speak flawless English.



Yesterday we drove the 229 kilometers from Delhi to Agra on an Indian superhighway. This was a toll road with a median strip and two lanes in either direction. Sounds like about a two-hour drive, right. It took well over five hours. The problem is that

there are no restrictions on who can use the highway. There were—I am not making this up—pedestrians, dogs, cows, camel carts, horse carts, one elephant, farm carts with enormous loads of straw held in place by cotton sheets and sagging down on all four sides. Sometimes these were pulled by camels, sometimes by tractors. There were motorized rickshaws with 12 people aboard. There were bicycles, motorcycles, slow cars, fast cars, trucks, buses. The method of driving is to pull up to about six inches behind the truck in front of you and blow your horn. If he moves over, you pass; if he doesn't, you pass on the inside.

Then there was the stretch where the traffic coming the other way was suddenly on our side. No warning, no signs, no traffic cones, just trucks coming straight at you at sixty miles per hour.

Our driver is both patient, and under the circumstances, cautious,

but I wouldn't like to see him try it in the US. He told us that to drive in India you need three things: Good brakes, a good horn, and good luck.

The Taj Mahal is spectacular. None of those beautiful photographs you have seen begin to do it justice. It is surely the most beautiful building I've ever seen. The facade has a three-dimensional quality that simply doesn't show up in the pictures. If you haven't been, be sure to go some time in your life.

I'm sure you've all heard that it was build by Shah Jahan for his wife, who died in childbirth. We got some details that make the story more interesting. First of all, Shah Jahan means ruler of the universe. A modest fellow. Hi wife died having their fourteenth child, after 19 years of marriage. Building the Taj Mahal took 22 years and practically bankrupted the kingdom. He planned to build another mausoleum for himself, across the river. It was going to be in black marble. His son thought this was a bit much and staged a coupe. He imprisoned his father in a rather beautiful pavilion on one wall of the palace. From there Shah Jahan could see the Taj Mahal and he could be seen by his subjects, some of whom came to pay their respects. The son also killed his two brothers to avoid complications. His sister decided she didn't like these goings on and stayed with their father, looking after him during his eight years of imprisonment. Shah Jahan died in the prison and is buried next to his wife Mumtaz Mahal in the Taj. (His other three wives are also buried there but they only got some rather modest gateways dedicated to them.)

Today we drove the 250 kilometers from Agra to Jaipur. We thought the Delhi-Agra road was exciting but this was a real eye opener. The same basic rules for overtaking apply except that now there is not only traffic coming the other way, but they are applying the rules in their direction. It's best not to watch. I estimate that there is a truck or bus every half kilometer. That makes about 500 on the road at any given time. Since they take about the same time to cover the distance as we did, that means that we probably passed about 1,000 trucks. We saw three that had been disabled by accidents, including the one in the attached picture, which had hit a car and turned over. That means that

Letter from Jaipur (continued)

April 23, 2005

your chances of having an accident when driving a truck from Jaipur to Agra are about 3 in 1000. Not good odds at all.

OK. No more traffic stories. The various forts and palaces we have visited are magnificent. They are on a vast scale, much larger than the equivalent structures in Europe. The fort in Agra is huge. The walls are 2.5 kilometers around. It was built in 1556 to house Akbar the Great's army. By that time the Europeans had pretty much given up building forts and taken to palaces. Hampton Court comes to mind. I suppose that India was much more subject to invasion than England so a large standing army was essential.



By the way, have I mentioned that the temperature here is generally about 105 degrees. Luckily it's dry and we have managed OK. We try to stay out of the sun in the middle of the day and we drink enormous quantities of water. Our driver tells

us that it goes to 120 at the height of the hot season in another month or so. As you can imagine the countryside is parched. They grow a crop of rice during the monsoon and then a crop of wheat in the cool season. Right now nothing grows.

Melinda has been reading the "Grooms Wanted" ads. They are sorted by Caste: Agarwal, Arora, Brahmin, Sindhi. I thought maybe Melinda was going to auction me off but she tells me I'm too old. Here are a few samples:

"Highly Reputed well known High Status Industrialist Hindu Punjabi Family of South Delhi seeks alliance for their Slim, Fair, Beautiful, Homely daughter..."

"... is looking for a charming beautiful Tall Girl From Reputed Industrialist..."

"... seeks alliance for their tall, slim, wheatish, pleasing, outgoing with etiquette, talented sporty daughter..."

I think that Indian English is becoming a dialect separate from standard English. It is spoken with a different rhythm, it has its own pronunciation, and words often have different meanings.

Of course, there was also the hotel on the way into town with the name "Last Stop Hotel."

Bill/Dad

Dear Persistent Reader,

I'm afraid I may be driving you to distraction with all my stories of Indian traffic. But you must understand that survival depends on a crash course in cycle avoidance and you have to learn to jump when you hear a horn behind you. Any other path is a road to disaster. OK, I'll try to steer another course.



Yesterday we were in Ranthambore. This is a national park and used to be the Maharaja of Jaipur's private hunting preserve. The big attraction here is tigers. You get into an open truck with eighteen seats, an Indian driver and a guide. There are usually several hangers on in the front area of the truck. Then you drive at a great rate across dirt tracks through mountainous terrain with vertiginous drop offs. The wheels are set fairly far in under the truck so it often looks as though you are hanging out over the edge. The views are spectacular. This time of year the trees are bare and the ground is utterly dry. The animals depend on two lakes, one of which has dried up and the other is expected to be dry in another couple of weeks. After that they have to truck in water. Spotted around the park are buildings left over from the Maharaja's day: Pavilions and gamekeepers huts and platforms with Mughal arches supporting the roof. You can imagine the hunting party pausing there for a picnic. Since Jaipur was Hindu, not Muslim, they might even have had Champagne. The whole scene is watched over by a huge fort—think castle—on the top of one of the mountains. It's the second largest in India and stretches for miles. In the fort is a temple to Ganesh, the elephant-headed god of wealth.

We went out three times, each time for three hours. In the morning yesterday we started at 6:30 and had a madcap driver. As soon as we got in the park he had the guide announce that we were going to drive quickly to find the tigers and that we weren't going to stop for other animals. Well, we did. After about

40 minutes of careening through the jungle we reached the spot where a mother tiger with two cubs had made a kill. All three were hanging around. We got really close to the mother—we could see the yellow of her eyes—and also saw the cubs from a little further away. On the way out we saw many kinds of deer and antelope, a mongoose, and lots of monkeys. The monkeys were the stars of the show. They hang around in troops and bounce in and out of the trees. They have a habit of throwing things at the tourists. I could sit and watch them for hours.

The only entrance/exit from the park goes through an old, fortified gate and into a little square. From the square a path leads up the mountainside to the fort and a single lane road leads out to the highway. Yesterday was the one day in the month where pilgrims come to pray to Ganesh in the temple at the top of the mountain. So when we tried to leave, the square was jammed with jeeps, trucks, motorcycles, men in turbans and ladies in saris, monkeys, donkeys and most anything else you could think of. More trucks and jeeps were coming in all the time. Our driver made a valiant effort to get out and by dint of much yelling and gesticulating he finally managed to back up some of the jeeps and get a truck to squeeze by us to open a path. Just as all of this was about to work a motorcycle carrying a man, his wife riding sidesaddle in a sari and their four year old son squeezed into the one critical spot where he could lock up the entire assembly. Once he got there he proceeded to blow his horn continuously for the next five or six minutes—I'm not making it up and I'm not exaggerating. This put our driver over the top. He went ballistic. I think he even managed to cow some of the other drivers—no mean feat. Eventually we actually got out onto the road and after a few more close squeezes got to an open section of road. (One jeep was having a hard time getting by us and our driver handed over a dirty towel, apparently so that the other driver could drape it over his fender to protect it as he went by.) After we got free the driver decided he needed to make up for lost time. He drove about 40 miles an hour in a vehicle meant for 15, downhill on this twisty, single-lane road. Every once in a while we would meet another poor jeep trying to make it in. When we did the jeep had no choice but to head for the ditch. There was

no way we were going to stop in the space provided. I sat in the front seat through all of this—much scarier than any roller coaster I've ever been on.

Only later did Patrick, the very nice fellow who ran our hotel—



and who was along for the ride in the morning - tell us that this particular driver was the best at finding tigers. Whenever the other guides went out, they wanted to go with him. He also had been banned from the park for months at a time because he'd find out

where the tigers were and go straight there rather than follow the assigned route that each vehicle is given when it enters the park. He's also known for his volatile temper.

The swimming pool in the hotel was dry because Patrick had pumped the water out to avoid it being filled with dust—we had a considerable dust storm in the evening yesterday. We asked him what became of the water and he said that he pumped it outside the hotel walls so that the local people could use it. He also told us that he'd told another hotel manager about this and had warned him that it should only be used on flowers and trees, not on edible crops. The other manager also gave the water to the locals but forgot the warning. One of the villagers used it to water some grass and then fed it to his water buffalos. Two of them died from the chemicals that the grass had absorbed from the water.

Today we drove to Pushkar. This is a Hindu holy city. In order for a Hindu's life to be considered a success he or she must make a pilgrimage to Pushkar at least once. The town is built around a sacred lake. The lake was formed when Brahma dropped a lotus flower. Where it fell to the ground natural springs occurred and they feed the lake. (Of course in recent years it's become so polluted that the fish all died so they have had to seal off the springs and pump in water.) There are ghats all around the lake. These are graceful flights of steps that descend to the water.

Pilgrims use them to bathe and the ashes of the dead are carried down the ghats and distributed on the water. Each of the ghats was built as a memorial to a Maharaja who'd made a pilgrimage to Pushkar and bathed at that site. Except for one that was built by Queen Mary who visited Pushkar and was shocked that there were no separate facilities for the women and had a woman's ghat built.

Looking at the lake it's hard to imagine anyone going in to bathe and coming out alive but we saw lots of kids swimming, so I guess they do. Which reminds me that in Jaipur we saw two gigantic silver water containers - about eight feet tall; they held over 900 gallons of water. They were created for the Maharaja's visit to London so that he could take water from the river Ganges along with him. He didn't trust the London water.



There are 400 temples in the town. The most important is to Brahma and is the only one in India dedicated to him. The story is that he wanted to come to Pushkar to perform a ceremony and when his first wife didn't accompany him, he took a second wife.

When the first wife showed up she was rather annoyed and vowed that Brahma would never be worshipped anywhere else. There is also a First Wives temple on the top of a steep mountain outside of town. To get to it you have to climb 300 stairs. We decided to pass.

The attached picture makes Pushkar look like a fairly idyllic place. What it doesn't convey is the smells, the hustlers, the traffic, the cows in the street, the monkeys throwing things, and the general disarray. This could be a beautiful place if we could just get some Italians in here to straighten things out. I'd suggest Germans but they'd never last here. You need someone who's more used to a little disorder. Oh, and by the way, the town is dry, no meat of any

Letter from Pushkar *(continued)*

April 28, 2005

kind is served, and no eggs either.

A final word, on the way here we passed a company doing business under the name of "Everlast Asbestos." I guess that the lawyers haven't reached India yet. (We saw a television program about the survivors of Bhopal, many of whom have yet to be paid by Union Carbide. They are being made to re-identify themselves repeatedly, which is not so easy to do in India, apparently as a stalling tactic.)

Oh yes, if anyone wants an idea for a video game, how about "Driving in India." You could have separate levels for city driving, one lane roads, highways, night driving. You could also make the density of camel carts, motorized rickshaws, and elephants variable. I think this has great potential, and the scenery would be dynamite.

Bill/Dad

PS: This is how we feel at the end of the day:

