

A photograph of a cyclist from behind, riding away on a paved mountain path. The cyclist is wearing a green helmet and is shirtless. The bicycle is heavily loaded with gear, including red panniers, a green bag on top, and a yellow bag on the front. The background features a large, snow-capped mountain peak under a blue sky with some clouds.

bombay

to

beijing

by

bicycle

russell
mcgilton

About Bombay to Beijing by Bicycle

“Congratulations,” said Dr Chawla. “You are having the malaria.”

And so begins Russell McGilton’s comic adventure as he attempts to cycle from Bombay to Beijing in the quest of writing his travel opus.

Pedalling furiously for China, McGilton’s tour de force rides the audience through an honest handlebar view on the absurdities and fragile wonders of travel from the saddle. He rides, he falls, he gets chased by wild dogs, eats things he shouldn’t, battles tropical hallucinations and finds himself at the hands of the curious Dr Chawla.

Not quite the Lonely Planet guide to sun and sex.

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~~In loving memory of my father - may you still play the golden Hammond - and
Krista Bernard, cycle adventurer and inspiration to many~~

Prologue

'Congratulations,' grinned Dr Chawla as he handed me my blood test result. 'You are having the malaria.'

'Malaria?'

'Yes, yes.' He smiled again as he slouched back in his chair and scratched his crotch. 'Wonderful.'

'Tell me, Doctor,' I said, wiping sweat from my eye, 'is this the kind of malaria that goes to your brain ... and then kills you?'

'No, no, no, no,' he said and, just before I could breathe a sigh of relief, 'not yet.'

I tried to relax as my head slowly slid off my shoulders. Here I was in the middle of rural India, miles from anywhere while some deadly malaria strain coursed through my veins.

'Do many people die from this around here?'

'Yes, many!' He smiled brightly, then flipped me over a squeaky hospital bed and whacked a needle in my bum.

It was at this moment, with my face jammed against a stained pillowcase and a prick rammed in my rear, that I wondered how I got here, why I came here and why I wasn't at home stuffing my face with chocolate biscuits and watching erotic Spanish movies on SBS: 'Me golpearon con un burro, Victor!'ⁱ

There were numerous reasons, but one in particular that had pushed me over the edge and onto a plane. You see, some months prior to my feverish dilemma my father had died. I inherited money and wanted to do something responsible with it, such as get a mortgage. This, of course, meant getting a steady job, something more permanent than my recent endeavours: a cameo on Neighbours and then, upping my range, a job as a silhouette in a commercial. (I was fired because my bald head was, to quote the director, 'too shiny'.)

My writing, on the other hand, was gaining much better traction with numerous articles published in newspapers and magazines. So I decided to knuckle down and get a job as a journalist.

Try as I might, ten months later I had been turned down by every newspaper, magazine, website, zine and pamphlet publisher in the country. But just as I was flirting with the possibility of becoming a stringerⁱⁱ ('Ah! The civil war in Sudan looks nice ...'), I received a call from the Age newspaper. They wanted me to come in for an interview. This was miraculous in itself; I had sat an exam for that very privilege and was sure I had failed.

I groomed myself in the art of interviewing. I read all the books. I role-played with friends. I even sought professional advice from a careers counsellor. I was going to crack this baby.

But, as I was about to learn, no matter how well I prepared myself, no matter how badly I wanted to change the course of my life in that year of 2000, fate sometimes just decides to have her way with you.

'Let's pretend for a moment that you're in a time machine,' said Colin, a serious man with a bald, freckly head amid a panel of tight HR suits. He had been newspaperman for 20 years and had the paper cuts to prove it. 'You can go anywhere you like, at any time you like. Whom would you interview?'

My career counsellor, concerned at my habit of blurting out whatever was on my mind, had advised me to 'pause and marshal my thoughts'. But old habits die hard.

'William Burroughs.'

'Why?'

'Cause he shot his wife in the head.'

The panel of interviewers raised their eyebrows one after the other like a Mexican wave.

'Why else would you interview him?' Colin pressed.

'Er ... he was into some pretty wild drugs. Not that I'm into that kind of thing (A damned lie.) 'It's just that ... he wrote about the most amazing things.'

'Such as?'

Oh, well he wrote this story about baboons taking over the US senate and fucking all the senators in the - stop! Brain! Stop!

'He used to cut up narratives, I mean, from books, and create a new story.'

'Any other reason?'

My mind went blank. Well, not quite. 'Er ... 'cause he was into little boys?'

Oh, Christ! What must they be thinking? That I'm a wife-shooting, drug-taking paedophile?

Colin and the suits shifted in their chairs.

'Now, we don't normally do this, but we made an exception for you.' He pulled out my exam paper.

Exception? What exception?

'Looking at the questionnaire, it seems that you don't know very much.'

'Pardon?'

'You got less than a third of the questions right.'

'Well, not exactly,' I stammered. 'I mean ... it's just that ... it's just that I don't know the answers to those questions!'

'Do you think it is important that a journalist should know a lot of things?'

'Well ... yes. Yes, of course.'

'Let's move on.' Colin flipped over the exam paper. 'The writing component. Now tell me. In your defence from the prosecution, namely us, how would you defend yourself from the very obvious mistake in your story?'

I swallowed. 'Mistake?'

'Yes. In your story from the police report you have put the number of the crack house as 32 Audrey Street when it is quite clearly number 23 Audrey Street on the fact page.'

He showed me my horrid blunder.

'How do you defend yourself against such an inexcusable mistake? A mistake that could have had us sued by the people at 32 Audrey Street if this story went to print.'

'You see,' a revelation struck me, 'under your code of ethics you wouldn't have been allowed to print the address of the victim.'

'Then why did you put it in your story?!' Colin and the suits chorused.

'Ah, that's because I didn't know about the code of ethics before the exam!' said, throwing a triumphant smile. They didn't smile back.

Later that evening

'Anyway,' I said to Alan, a good friend of mine, splashing puddles of red wine around his house, 'what was wrong with my answers?'

'Well aren't journalists supposed to be able to argue a point? You know, present a lively discussion?'

'Oh, Alan, I don't know how to argue. I mean, I'm an actor —'

'Sooo, you're an actor now?'

'Look. What did they expect?'

'A journalist,' he sighed heavily, letting the conversation deflate him. 'So what are you going to do?'

At this moment, the memory of my father's death seemed to squeeze the knee of my mortality just a little tighter, asking ever so impatiently, 'What exactly are you doing with your life?'

For some time I'd been harbouring the idea of writing a travel book and rather than let that ship sit in dock and sink (like my father who never accomplished what he wanted) I was going to make it set sail.

So looking for inspiration I found myself in the travel section of my local library perusing through a rather obscure book entitled Full Tilt by Dervla Murphy.

Murphy was a stout Irishwoman with a head the size of a bar fridgeⁱⁱⁱ, who in 1963 cycled from Dunkirk to Delhi. She endured one of Europe's worst winters, was attacked by wolves in Yugoslavia, travelled through Pakistan's baking 50 degree heat, copped a gutful of dysentery, and was forced to shoot at bike thieves in Iran.

It sounded just the ticket for me!

Of course, I didn't exactly want to suffer those kind of travails, but what struck me was that the bike provided a conduit for stories, unusual stories, stories that you weren't likely to get as a backpacker where you're subjected to the tyranny of bus and train schedules, tourist touts, that inevitably lead to a sameness of experience.

I had, however, had the brief joy of cycle touring with Al through New Zealand. We were unfit, flabby and so under-prepared and swore never to travel with each other again (actually, I think we just swore). But what we both liked was that you got time to enjoy the environment more, smell it, feel it, unlike the countless Marlborough Campervans and tourist buses that rushed from town to hotel, hotel to town.

Dervla's stories set my imagination in motion. The question was: where to go?

Of late I had been under the spell from travellers' stories of the Sub-Indian continent and India soon seduced me with promises of exotic desert nights

ancient architecture, colourful tribes, renegade hippies, yoga and Bollywood movies. I wanted to taste her spices, feel her dust and her rain.

As for China, I heard things were changing quickly there. Foreigners no longer had to take a guide with them, and more of the country was becoming accessible. With a bike, the possibilities of unrestricted travel (except in Tibet) made China just that bit more enticing. The more I thought about it, the more I really liked the idea of being lost in a foreign culture: I wanted to be confused by Chinese street signs, eat things that questioned my better judgement, and be that weigore stumbling through backstreet markets lost to it all as the soft lilts of Mandarin swirled around me.

So late one night, flipping through an old high school atlas and admiring the well-rounded contours of the Himalayas flowing into India and China, an idea hit me: if Dervla cycled from Dunkirk to Delhi, then why not ... Bombay to Beijing?

I set out a pile of matchsticks like a trail of ants across the atlas and came up with an exact distance of ...

■ ■ ■ **LOTS!**

Well, approximately 10 000 kilometres. If I cycled 55 kilometres each day, I would be able to complete the trip in eight months (with tea breaks, maybe ten). It would be a doddle!

'Bombay to Beijing by Bicycle ... what a great title for a book!'

Except there was one big problem with that.

MELBOURNE – BOMBAY/MUMBAI

January, 2001

I have never liked flying, and I was about to never like it even more. At 35 000 feet, this became abundantly obvious.

'You are cycling from Bombay to Beijing?' asked a rotund Indian man sitting next to me while Denzel Washington flashed across a small television screen above us in football gear. His name was DeeJay and though his name might suggest something in the hip music world, he was in fact an IT consultant living in Sydney.

'Yes,' I said.

'But why? We have trains and buses there. Much easier for you, I think.'

'Well, you see, cycling lets you delve into the lives of people you wouldn't normally meet. You get to be one with the landscape, letting it wash over you.'

He snorted. 'To be with the common man?'

'Well, that's part of it. I'm writing a book and I thought Bombay to Beijing by Bicycle would be an excellent title.'

'Ah, the alliteration.'

'Precisely. The bum-de-bum, bum-de-bum sound,' I said, thumping my hand on each 'b' to stress the point.

'Bombay to Beijing by Bicycle!' He laughed, then sipped his tea thoughtfully. 'Only ...'

'What is it?'

'Bombay, my friend, is not Bombay anymore.'

'What?'

'This is the old name. It is now Mumbai.'

I gulped my scotch, spilling it down my chin. 'Oh, sure. Right. I know. It's just that in my guidebook it's got "Mumbai slash Bombay". I mean, doesn't everyone still refer to it as Bombay? You know, when I was in Ho Chi Minh City the locals kept calling it Saigon. Or Myanmar still being referred to as Burma. You know, one and the same ... interchangeable ... well, aren't they?'

'No, no. It is Mumbai.' He grinned then put on his headphones and went back to watching Denzel teach white boys how to tackle.

'Mumbai ...' I said to myself. 'Mumbai to Beijing by ...' I looked out at the escaping Australian desert, suddenly wanting to retrieve it.

'Shit!'

The next morning I woke to the sound of the phone ringing.

'Good morning, sir. Breakfast? Buddha toast, omelette, chai. Vhot are yo wanting?'

'Could I please have the buttered toast, chai, omelette ... jam?'

'Okay.'

He hung up.

I opened the drapes. The sun was out, warming the run-down and mildewed buildings opposite, their window ledges chalked with pigeon shit. Dusty rainwater pipes ran this way and that like some alien mechanical creeper while a large yellow sheet, hung out to dry, tongued its way down a wall.

This was the daylight squalor I had imagined as I bounced around Mumbai traffic the previous night.

'Sorry, sir,' the taxi driver had said, swerving out of the way of a doorless bus. 'Much traffic bumping. No good here in India. Many bad peoples driving without permission.'

I was in Colaba, a narrow peninsula of Mumbai bubbling with hotels, tourist markets and restaurants by the sea. Under the morning sun, ragged men, dark and the rubbish around them, shovelled clumps of brown muck onto wagons pulled by water buffalo while business men briskly marched past, skipping over holes in the pavement as their leather briefcases pumped them towards towering office buildings. Women delicately tiptoed around a beggar sitting by a gift store, the gold and red saris floating around the women as if they were walking under water. Meanwhile, inside my hotel, a child exhausted itself into convulsive, tearful retches.

Mumbai sounded big, and with good reason. Over 16 million people live^{iv}, work and breathe in this colliding metropolis. It has the biggest film industry in the world, more millionaires than New York, and a port that handles half of India's foreign trade. Workers from Assam, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan and even as far away as Nepal come here to make it big in this collective maelstrom, doing any work they can find. Many are unlucky and find themselves in one of the largest street slums of India, if not the world.

I turned on the air-conditioner and looked at the mess that had taken over my room: a Trek mountain bike: four panniers (bike bags), a handlebar bag and a medium-sized backpack. A total weight (bike included) of 43 kilograms^v. While Dervla Murphy carried only a small kitbag of clothes, a handgun and a dash of courage, I felt it prudent to pack for the worst.

Just as I was considering all this the door burst open.

A porter, sweating in the humidity, charged in with breakfast, and put it on the table. This would be a common experience for me in India - staff walking in on me without a knock catching me in all sorts of undress not to mention compromising situations.

'Welcome to Bombay, sir.'

'Bombay? I thought it was called Mumbai?'

He smiled. 'As you like.'

Deejay had been wrong, it seemed (or just winding me up). As I would find out later, Indians were still using the name Bombay quite liberally: taxi drivers asked

where in Bombay I wanted to go to, students eagerly asked for my impressions of Bombay, restaurant owners praised Bombay epicure, hotel managers requested information on the duration of my stay in Bombay, and the local film industry was still referred to as Bollywood, not Mollywood.

Perhaps the new name hadn't been embraced for political reasons. In 1996 Bombay's name was changed to Mumbai after pressure on the Indian government from the ultra-right-wing Shivsena party, led by the prickly Bal Thackeray. The name change was aimed at repelling legacies of India's past colonisation and encroaching Westernisation. British names had been written over with Indian ones - street names, places and features of the city that lent reference to the Raj.

The smell of omelette took me from these thoughts and sat me down to breakfast, where I noticed that something was missing. Everything was there - the omelette, tea and toast ...

'Jam?' I asked the porter, but he simply wobbled his head again and left.

What was with the head-wobble? Was it a 'yes', a 'no', 'I don't know?' or 'I'll just keep you guessing'? It reminded me of those toy dogs you used to see in the back of old Chrysler Valiants, heads jiggling happily.

I bit into my omelette when a distinct sweetness hit my palate. 'Oooh! They've mixed the jam in!'

With my jam-curried omelette hanging off my fork, I unfurled my Nelles map of India and China.

When I first decided to do this trip back in Melbourne, my plan was to start from Mumbai/Bombay, straight through to Nepal then into Tibet, China and eventually Beijing. However, the Chinese government were (and still are) a bit sensitive about independent foreign travellers, let alone cyclists, going through this border crossing (mmm ... could it be the wholesale destruction of the Tibetan people and their culture that they don't want us to see?), thus they were barred from passing. It was only on organised tour groups that this was possible.

So, my plan changed to China via Pakistan.



But this changed again when four months before I was about to leave, I fell in love.

A gorgeous blue-eyed blonde, Rebecca, a recently qualified acupuncturist and eight years my junior had caught me hook line and sinker. She too was going travelling, and as it was her first time, adamant about doing it on her own.

'Besides,' she had said, flicking through travel guides at the bookstore, 'Europe's more my thing. Not India.'

'But just imagine Bec, there we are in an Indian palace, making love in the steamy monsoonal heat, while the rain trickled and danced outside and a cool breeze refreshed our hot naked bodies ... mmm?'

'Ooh! Now, there's a thought!'

Of course, this wasn't the only reason Bec eventually agreed. She wasn't the kinda girl. Bec was going because she wanted to meet the people, learn about the history, to understand the cultural milieu and the colonial context in subcontinental India ... actually, no, I think she was just going for the sex! Hell, that would be enough for me. 'You wanna shag over a Indonesian volcano ... surrrreee!'

'Just say anywhere on my itinerary, Bec, and we can meet up there for a month and then you can do your own thing.'

She looked at the map and pointed to an obscure splog.

'Kathmandu!?! But that's not on the way,' I protested.

'Yes, it is darling!'

And because women are always right, I made a 'slight' 3000-kilometre detour via Rajasthan (to beat the approaching summer).

This was my final plan:



Yes, I know. It makes Winston Churchill's hiccup [vi](#) look like an epileptic seizure. But would you believe it got far worse?

After breakfast, I set to work on assembling the bike, most of that time spent straightening or 'truing', as it's called, the front wheel ('Thanks Qantas!').

Dervla, before her big trip, christened her bike 'Roz'. Not to be outdone, I called mine 'bike'.

Once ready, I hauled 'bike' over my shoulder, walked downstairs and, with stiff breath, threw myself into the maelstrom of traffic for my debut ride into Mumbai.

Of course, the first thing you notice about cycling in Mumbai is the traffic. In Melbourne, cyclists go on the far left of the road and cars go on the right. In India, well, it's pretty much the same except the cows go on the far left and cars on the right.

The reason cows in India have such free rein of the roads, footpaths and in some cases (as I have seen) banks, is because of that well-known fact that they are considered - in India's largest religion, Hinduism - to be sacred. In its religious texts cows are represented with their famous deities: Lord Rama, The Protector, received a dowry of a thousand cows; a bull was used to transport Lord Shiva, The Destroyer; while the Lord Krishna, The Supreme Being, was a humble cowherd. There are even temples built in honour of them.

Cows are so loved in India, Mahatma Gandhi went so far as to declare, 'Mother cow is in many ways better than the mother who gave us birth'. Somehow, I don't think mothers around the world would be impressed with Gandhi's comparison, i.e. being upstaged by some dozy, garbage-eating ruminant with hairy teats.

Anyway, it is no wonder that it is illegal to eat or harm cows in most states of India.

Now the problem with all this ... this overt bovine respect, is that the cow people, the cows ... know this! And let me tell you something - they are the rudest and most arrogant cows (apart from the ones in public office) that I have ever met in my entire life!

They just lurch out in front of you like a second-hand couch falling off a truck without so much as a cursory look. So many times I've had to slam on the brakes to narrowly miss their voluminous rumps or have been 'nosed' off the pavement for being in their way. I've even seen gangs of them plonking down in the middle of traffic like some grazing roundabout. I tried to exact some kind of revenge by going to McDonalds but to my dismay they only sold mutton burgers.

Despite the cows, cycling in Mumbai wasn't as dangerous as I had thought, even if there didn't seem to be enough space for anything other than taxis, crammed buses and the occasional gnat. Traffic moved a lot slower due to there being so much of it and drivers showed no sign of agitation as they beeped madly at seemingly everything around them.

It was, however, pollution that caused me the greatest of ills. Most drivers adulterated the fuel of their cars, auto-rickshaws, motorbikes or trucks with kerosene, as kerosene is much cheaper than petrol. Try as I might to block out the foul mess with a folded handkerchief over my face, this only served to scare the American Express staff when I went to cash a traveller's cheque.

I thought I'd go and see the Parsi Towers of Silence situated on Malaba Hill, a lush enclave of Mumbai some 5 kilometres away. For over 2500 years Parsis have been disposing of their dead in dokhmas (towers). In these towers, corpses are laid out naked and arranged according to age and sex, and are later ... devoured by vultures.

As I cycled into the thicket of street life along Colaba Causeway, my nose was assaulted by a confluence of smells: the heavy stench from open drains, the odour of stale urine, the relieving aroma of pakoras (fried vegetables) from street

vendors, and for contrast, the overpowering perfume from joss sticks placed like guards on the corner of erected tables selling bluish pictures of the Hindu monkey god, Hanuman.

I dodged workmen laying bricks on the road, and was forced onto the pavement and walked with the bike. A woman, sitting with her hand open to passers-by upon seeing me, grabbed at my shorts. I tried to keep walking but her nails caught in my shorts like blackberry thorns.

‘Ten rupees, sir. Ten rupees ...’

I pulled out a bunch of rupee notes and my shorts were instantly released.

Office workers were busily marching off to lunch, and as I dodged swinging limbs and sweaty business shirts, it appeared that I was walking in the wrong direction. My only relief came as I walked through the Oval Maidan, a broad parched park filled with enthusiastic young cricketers knocking cricket balls across its starkness.

Near Mumbai’s Churchgate Station throngs of passengers swam by. Across the current of faces, Tiffin boxes (silver tins with wire handles) were being stacked and carried on wooden barrows by men in cotton pyjamas and Nehru pillbox hats. These men were dabbawallahs (in local dialect, Marathi, dabba means ‘Tiffin carrier’; wallah means ‘man’), lunch-box couriers of the Mumbai Tiffin-Box Suppliers Association – a vestige of the British Raj. Every day, about 500 dabbawallahs deliver approximately 170 000 lunches (prepared by housewives) from suburban households to schools, universities and offices across Mumbai. Apparently, dabbawallahs, despite many being illiterate, only make one mistake for every eight million lunches delivered!

I watched two dabbawallahs spear through the slowing traffic, bounce the barrow over a gutter and disappear around a building.

I got back on the bike and cut through onto Marine Drive on the west side of Colaba where the Arabian Sea met the bay. On the beach lay clumps of rags flapping in the wind. Some of these rags got up and walked around – people, not whole communities, perhaps from the rural plains I would soon be cycling over were living among plastic bags of blue ruin. Behind them, smog chalked across Back Bay, leaving shadows of Colaba’s hotels like a badly printed watercolour.

Parched from the acrid taste of exhaust, I stopped at a restaurant, sat down and ordered a juice. Shortly after, a frumpish woman entered and greeted the waiter with a kiss and a devilish smile, her green-and-white sari swaying around her. I thought this was odd, as I had not seen an Indian woman greet any man in that way in the four days I had been here. And there was a reason for this, I soon discovered: she was a man or, rather, I think had been. She was a hijra – a caste of transvestites and eunuchs.

‘Give me some money,’ came a deep, smooth, yet feminine voice. She smiled at me, flirting a little.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Tsk!’ Her face twisted, taking her large smile with it. ‘You give me some rupees.’

‘What for?’

'Tsk! Give me money!'

'But what have you done?'

'Baksheesh,' she said, and her large smile returned with a proffered hand adorned with gold rings and bangles.

'No.'

'Tsk! You give me no money!' This time she hissed like a cat and made a strange claw with her fingers.

'Oh, dear. Am I cursed now?' I smiled, but her eyes were like razors and she shooed me away as if I were an overweight moth.

I was lucky I hadn't been spat on or, worse, flashed at by his/her missing bits. Hijras usually earn their living by turning up at weddings, births and other celebrations in the hope that their bad singing, dancing and vulgar habits will be put to a stop by a few handy bribes. If none of that paper note stuff comes their way, eunuchs will curse newborn babies, spit ochre-coloured paan juice on newlyweds or sometimes go as far as taking their own clothes off.

Although it's unclear how many hijras there are in India, the figure has been put at anything between 100 000 and 1.2 million - in other words, nobody has the foggiest. Hijras are generally either those born with deformed genitalia, hermaphrodites, transsexuals or voluntary castrates, while others have allegedly been kidnapped, drugged and castrated against their will.

Interestingly, because hijras have an insider's knowledge of local neighbourhoods (they always know in advance where a wedding will take place) some credit card companies now employ them as debt collectors. Somehow I can see that working particularly well in the East End of London: 'Ya gonna show me ya wot?'

I pushed up Malaba Hill through slivers of light, the sun trying to knife its way through the thick canopy of trees. At a junction, my guidebook got me lost, so I asked directions from a group of old men wearing Nehru hats and playing what looked to be Chinese chequers. They pointed further up the hill just as a kite snapped in front of my face; a gang of schoolchildren giggled and ran away with it.

I rode up through a lush tropical garden and arrived at a nondescript bungalow that I thought was the entry to the Towers of Silence. An old Parsi gentleman with a black silk cap and Lawrence Olivier air was circumspect about letting me go any further.

'What do you want?' he asked flatly.

I explained that, while I didn't want to go into the Towers of Silence, I wondered if perhaps I could see them from afar.

'Hmm,' he held a stiff gaze. 'Where are you from?'

'Australia.'

'Hmm. What are you doing with this bicycle?'

'Cycling.'

'From Australia! Good God!' and, before I could interject to say 'I've only done a few kilometres from Colaba', he was jabbering at his colleagues, who made lots of 'ooh, aah!' sounds and crowded around me.

'Oh, very far! You must be a strong man.'

'No, I—'

'Much hardship for you. Yes, sir. You must be such determination.'

He then palmed me off to a young man named Benjamin.

'He will show you the towers. Follow him.'

'They're much smaller than I imagined them to be,' I said.

'Yes, they are small.'

I leant over the square model of the towers; clearly such interest in Parsi funeral rites had forced the Parsis to make a proxy. Well, that and the fact that Time Life photographer had recently scaled a building opposite the towers and published colour photographs of a funeral, vultures and all. The Parsi community was understandably outraged.

'In here,' Benjamin said, pointing to four wells that surrounded the structure, 'flushes the remains. The blood goes down this chamber into the wells and filtered. The earth cannot be defiled by the dead.' He shook his finger. 'Nothing goes into the sacred elements - water, fire, air and earth.'

This isn't strictly true. There have been complaints from local residents finding the odd dismembered finger in their washing ('Ere? What's that finger doin' in m' undies?'), and of other titbits landing on passers-by as the vultures fly past looking for a private place to eat.

At the time of my visit, not all was well in the Towers of Silence. Corpses weren't being eaten. A type of sickness, Benjamin told me, was causing the vultures to die. It was in fact due to the use of Diclofena, an anti-inflammatory used on cattle. Vultures would eat the carcass, which in turn would cause their renal system to fail. The decimation of vultures was not unique to Mumbai but right across the Indian-subcontinent.

To remedy the lack of available vultures, the Parsi panchayat (council) had installed giant solar reflectors to hasten the process of corpse decomposition, as well as an ozone generator to help combat the stench. Some reformists within the Parsi community were opting for burying the dead while an aviary was being built to breed vultures in captivity.

Like the vultures, the Parsi community was also endangered. Only 90 000 Parsis live in India today, and their numbers are continuing to drop due to intermarriage and a historical disadvantage. When the Parsis' ancestors - known then as Persians - first arrived in India sometime around the tenth century, the Hindu ruler of Gujarat allowed them to stay, on the condition that they were not allowed to convert his subjects to their religion, Zoroastrianism. Even now, the Hindu community regards the Parsis as outsiders.

I thanked Benjamin for his time, got back on my bike and followed the road down the winding hill. It wasn't long before I was hopelessly lost. I looked to the sinking sun to get my bearings.

I figured that if I headed south I would eventually end up in Colaba's narrow peninsula and back at my hotel. Dodging an elephant, numerous potholes and wallahs pushing a large barrow stacked with bricks, I found myself in a race with two teenagers - one with particularly large glasses and a vibrant red fez - c

bicycles. Trying to gain a few lengths on these boys, I swung out of the traffic, overtook a taxi and found myself in a suicidal collision with an oncoming truck. I slammed on my brakes, causing the back wheel to lock me into a terrifying slide that ended when I smashed into the door of a taxi. I expected the driver to erupt from the taxi in a rage but he merely wobbled his head when I apologised.

It was peak hour and the streets were choked with traffic and accompanied by insane, erratic beeping and blaring. I battled through it, coughing and sputtering through the exhaust until the traffic eased and my lungs began to clear.

When I got back to the hotel I hauled the bike over my shoulder, trudged up three flights of stairs, threw the bike against the wall, then went to the toilet and threw up. I then washed my face, flopped on the bed and passed out, overcome with Mumbai's polluted breath.

I awoke the next morning to the phone ringing. I picked it up.

'Omelette jam?'

*BOMBAY/MUMBAI***January**

On my past travels I have noticed how residents of each country have a different way of going to the cinema. In Thailand, patrons stand with hands on hearts when the King's picture is screened, while in Zimbabwe, locals face their country's flag and sing their national anthem. But in India ... people run!

Swarms of people were squashed up against the padlocked steel gate of the Regal Cinema, an Art Deco building crumbling silently in the night. When the gate opened it was on for young and old and I felt the crush of bodies push past. Over ten million people across India go to the cinema in a single day, and at this moment it felt like they had all decided to come to this one. I shrank up against the wall, spilling my soapy tea, while old ladies jostled and elbowed their way as to reclaim a dowry from a recalcitrant daughter-in-law. I didn't understand the rush; 50 rupees got me a reserved seat, didn't it? I soon realised my mistake: the seat numbers had worn off over the years of attentive neglect but no one had bothered to mention this to management, who were happily giving out numbered tickets and dutifully directing patrons to their seats.

Inside, chaos led the way. Families were jumping, running and throwing themselves into chairs, then valiantly fighting off newcomers. One man was barking directions, pointing at vacant seats and waving what appeared to be his immediate family, his extended family and his extended-extended family through to fill the row. Or maybe there were just a lot of people following one guy; it was hard to say.

Up in the stalls, I jumped into the nearest seat and languished in my dilapidated comfort until a curt-bordering-on-rude voice said, 'This is not your seat.'

I looked up, prepared to sneer at any seat-bumpers, but instead it was the usher.

'How do you know? There are no seat numbers.'

The usher ignored my protests and led me upstairs - right up the back and next to a gang of jabbering youths.

'How do you know this is the right seat?'

'It is on your ticket!' he said as if I were a blind idiot.

'But there's no seat number on the seat!' I protested but he was gone, moving people who were, to their surprise, in the wrong seat.

A family of five stood in confusion at my row. Another usher came up to me and demanded to see my ticket. He flicked his torch on it.

'Your seat is not correct.'

'But -'

'No, this is the wrong number to the seat.'

'What?'

'The ticket is correct but the seat is not. Come with me.'

He deposited me on the far left of the cinema behind a pillar.

'This is your correct seat.'

'Are you sure about that? There are no seat numbers here. How can you give me the right seat if there are no numbers? Hmm?'

His body rocked like a wave.

'It is correct,' he said and floated away into the darkness, delivering people to their seats with an unnerving self-assuredness.

The trailers began. Screeching, distorted noise hurt my ears as a community film about residents not rubbishing their neighbourhood clunked across the screen. We saw a man about to spit, another about to urinate, girls throwing rubbish on a beach, and a housewife liberally turfing scraps out of her house onto the street. The solution to this terrible depravity was to put the rubbish in a bin which in India seemed to be like trying to find a vindaloo curry that wasn't hot.

I was here to see Raju Chacha, a typical Bollywood film. As a genre, Bollywood created itself out of other film styles; this genre is known as the 'masala formula' (named after a culinary term for a mix of several flavours in a single dish). Everything is thrown in - musicals, comedy, horror, action, romance, cartoons and even science fiction. All except pornography. In fact, the most you'll ever see of that kind of business is a wet, gyrating sari or a naked shoulder. You're lucky there's even a kiss. In fact, the leading actors seem to be pulled out of shot by stagehands just as their moist lips are about to daringly meet.

Raju Chacha's claim to fame was that it was made with one of the biggest budgets in Bollywood history: 35 crore, the equivalent of \$US7.22 million. Like Hollywood films, however, a bigger budget didn't necessarily mean a better script. I sat trying to piece together threads of the story amid its tiresome slapstick but am still to this day not entirely sure what I saw.

I vaguely remember something about a rich architect widower and his three brattish kids living in a garish pink-and-gold mansion with a rainbow-gravel circular driveway and Graceland-style guitar steel gate.

The plot was hatched along the lines of 'evil relatives plan to kill father and take over his millions'. One minute we were watching the father (who had an uncanny resemblance to the TV host Daryl Somers) dance around the house, and then, in the next second he had suddenly morphed into a Lion King cartoon.

But what really surprised about this experience was, unlike going to the movies at home, where even the slightest crackle of Maltesers received hails of shared abuse, in India it was entirely the opposite. The audience yabbered loudly at each other, got up to stretch, went outside, banged doors noisily, sang to themselves or yawned. This was refreshing and if I knew what the hell was going on I would've joined in, being a loud person myself.

Afterwards, I hailed a taxi. As it sped through the empty, dark streets, Mumbai seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, as did its poorer inhabitants who slept when they could - on pavements, roundabouts, or on the bonnets of their taxis. Some were still working, like the wallahs clearing rubbish onto small carts pulled by

donkeys. I felt a twinge of guilt for going back to a comfortable hotel.

'If only India was like a Bollywood movie', I thought wistfully. 'Everyone dancing and singing their way out of poverty.'

The next morning I found myself in the rear of the Naval Office.

'You are wanting a map? You can try the CD-ROM,' said the Government Tourist Officer, whose skin was the colour of coal and his mouth too small to accommodate his crowded teeth.

When I went over to do just that, it wasn't working. When I told him of this he smiled as if he already knew.

'You can try the brochure.'

'But I'm after a map of India.'

'There is a map in it.'

He passed the brochure across the desk and I flicked through it. There were pictures of the usual tourist spots: the Taj Mahal, Jaisalmer Fortress, and hill stations. But one that caught my eye was a title declaring 'Come and see Wild Asses!' I immediately thought of bums cavorting and whinnying around a paddock. I laughed so loudly that the Tourist Officer broke from his chai, looked at the brochure again, and then stared at me with curious, skewed eyes.

'What's so funny?' I heard an English accent waft up from a leather couch. A young British couple sat with exhausted defeat. I pointed to the brochure and showed them my 'Wild Ass'.

'Oh, I see,' a young man said, unimpressed, and went back to reading his guidebook.

Jesus! What's wrong with these people? The very core of British comedy is built on bum humour. Carry On Up the Khyber, I say.

'Just arrived?' I enquired, with a hint of authority in my voice, trying to wash away my apparent faux pas.

'No. We're finishing up the trip. We've had enough,' he replied, shaking his sandy locks.

'Eh?'

'Culture shock,' he said. 'Can't deal with it, man. It's all too much. Delhi was 'orrible. Goa was better. More our scene. Lyin' on the beach, chillin'. What are you doin'?'

'Cycling.'

'Cycling!' said his girlfriend with a weary look. 'Mate, you're mad.'

'Yes,' I raised a proud eyebrow. 'I know.'

'No, no. You're mad,' she said seriously. 'I'm tellin' ya, it gets to ya. The staring at the 'assle, being ripped off, same questions every bloody day. We were on a bus for most of it. God knows what it would be like on a bike.'

Hassle? Staring? Culture shock? What were they on about? I'd hitchhiked through most of Africa. I'd survived typhoons while motorbiking around Taiwan. I'd nearly been shot at in Uganda. I'd been chased with machetes in the Congo.

And I'd even eaten sandwiches on British Rail! I was tough, baby.

~~But as I was to discover, no matter what a travel legend I thought I was, nothing would ever prepare me for the challenges of mother India.~~

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