

Image: Duncan Gregory



The distinction is in the detail (returning to India after ten years absence)

I'd forgotten what it's like to be surrounded by fifty tuk-tuks - or auto rickshaws as they call them here - all burbling away contentedly at the lights, belching toxic fumes into each other's path; or to sit on a tiny stool under the gaze of a thousand eyes, as a small Gandhian figure dressed in white, squats cross-legged on the ground, stitching my shoe back together again. My brain had failed miserably in remembering the detail of the magic that is India!

Yet to be truthful the detail is the important bit; not 'BKC', the sparkingly manicured Mumbai business centre, a stone's throw from the airport, or the still-under-construction fly-over snaking out to reach that brand new glass-towered, monument to progress: these are the ubiquitous constructions that blot the landscape wherever you travel. For me, what makes India so very distinctive are those individually miniscule aspects of life, that when sown together, represent a culture that nowhere else on Earth can replicate.

Back on the streets of the city where Ganesh Chaturthi - the festival to celebrate the Hindu God Ganesha - was made popular in the late 19th Century, I was once again

irrevocably submerged in this mesmerizing metropolis, formed by the British colonisers, from a series of islands and fishing villages, a century or two before Ganesh claimed his right to fame. Then known as Bombay, the place grew to become the industrial hub of the nation, home to more than 20 million inhabitants, leaving the old British Raj capital of Calcutta and the twentieth century federal centre Delhi, in its commercial wake.



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Surprisingly, the essentials of Mumbai, ten years on from my last visit; seemed totally unchanged. The same cafes were there, trading the same 'pav bhajis' and 'masala dosas', along with an array of other eye-watering foods; only the prices had changed! And the street-level stalls, including my very own shoemaker's square metre of operating space, all appeared incredibly familiar. Perhaps my mind was playing tricks, but I got the impression that the traffic chaos was even worse than before. *"You're right,"* said one of my local friends, *"the construction of underground rail and overhead highways means that current roads are often closed, which can double vehicle numbers on those which remain open."* That, I guessed, was the explanation for tuk-tuk hell and damnation at the lights!

India is a concoction of elements which combine to form an improbable whole: the stunning colour of the young lady in her salwar kameez and the not-so-young madam, swaying along in her more formal saree; the continuous chatter in various tongues, with backstage sounds from vehicles of all sizes; that tiny Hindu temple at the entrance to a shop, garlanded with the day's cut flowers; the street vendor with his display of succulent fruits and vegetables brought from the hinterland in the early morning; and

the spicy aromas enveloping each and every one of these tell-tale Indian vistas. The resultant whole owes much to religion – Hindu in particular - for how can a people having three hundred thousand colourful Gods (though an Indian friend told me at dinner one night that the figure was actually more than one billion!) end up being a colourless culture? Impossible!

On our way to the ferry that would eject us out of the Mumbai smog and across the water to the rural area of Alibag, I came across a small man selling gigantic balloons. There wa, he explained, a strong version ... and a very strong version. After an appropriate amount of haggling I took one of each, knowing that my younger daughter would love to get her hands on a contender for the world's largest toy balloon. At the time I was oblivious to the fact that my older daughter, stationed a few metres away from the action, was busily filming the whole encounter. Later I found my efforts posted on Facebook, with the caption: *"OMG, he's finally lost it!"*. The joys of social media.

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With the Gateway of India and Taj Mahal in our wake, we head South for Alibag.

The boat across the water offered an air-conditioned lower cabin, fairly much at water level, with a top deck above, for what I thought were the more hardy sun-lovers. Later, it turned out that price was the main factor for the contrast between packed upper deck and more sparsely populated lower cabin. A rather neatly dressed man came around carrying a large cloth shoulder bag, from which - with something of a flourish, as if pulling rabbits from a hat - he produced samosas: two on a paper saucer for 40 rupees

(equivalent to 40 English pence). With a vegetable inner, thick pastry outer and moderately spiced, these were just what the doctor ordered. We landed at Mandwa on the southern shore, refreshed, refueled and ready for a slice of India outside Mumbai.

There was a muffled scream and my daughter came rushing from her room, on to the rooftop terrace which overlooked the small beach-side village of Nagaon, the place we had chosen for our first night away from the big smoke.

“There’s a frog in my bathroom!” She declared. *“And by the way, no hot water.”*

By the time I got to the scene of the crime the frog had disappeared - I could only assume through the half-open, slatted window – but the supply of hot water was beyond my powers of control.

“Fixed the frog,” I announced boldly, back on the terrace. *“Maybe hot water will come later ... or perhaps in the morning.”*

Nagaon turned out to be a sleepy hollow on weekdays and something resembling the hectic hubbub of Mumbai on weekends. As perhaps the closest and easiest getaway spot for Mumbaikers seeking tranquility on their off-work days, it seemed sort of fitting that they should create a home-away-from-home in Nagaon, to remind themselves of the chaos left behind. Traffic jams on the tiny roads, packed restaurants by the beach and Bollywood music well into the night, were the hallmarks of Nagaon every Saturday and Sunday. Of course, the hoteliers and restaurant keepers greatly appreciated the influx of rupees that came with the wealthy rupee-carriers from the North, but I secretly suspected that most locals heaved a huge sigh of relief when everything returned to the normalcy of a green and peaceful village by the sea each Monday morning.

With the weekend experience of a mini-Mumbai behind us, we bussed off southward to see the sights and mix with the locals. When given the choice my daughter and I both preferred mixing over sightseeing, so when we came to the coastal village of Korlai, it was the narrow streets of the village and ladies drying fish on the foreshore that



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captured our attention, rather than the more famous fort, nearby. Further south we immersed ourselves in the captivating town of Murud, leaving the more famous Murud Janjira offshore fort to other adventurous visitors.

“What? You went to Murud and you didn’t visit Murud Janjira?” Friends would exclaim, in disbelief, when we returned to Mumbai; as if we had committed some sort of unforgiveable crime, almost equal to first degree murder!

“Well, we did think the town was amazing.” We replied sheepishly, staring down at our feet, half expecting to be handcuffed and led away for a few years in solitary, as a result of our treasonable act!

A tradition had developed from my many visits to India over several decades, whereby friends and relations would embark on a last-night-out, dinner extravaganza. With typical Indian flair, this ritual, while being very well-meaning on the part of the hosts, often became something of a humorous event, with unexpected twists. This time, our last night was no exception, when after repeated rounds of ‘Signature’, a redoubtable Indian whisky, we set out for the restaurant, which was (according to the host) ‘just a five minutes’ walk away’ from his apartment.

Fifteen minutes later we found ourselves darting across extremely busy and poorly lit roads, more focused on staying alive, than finding a place to eat. A little further on and somewhat disheveled, we regrouped and admitted we were totally lost. So then, squeezing into a number of passing auto rickshaws – three or four to each - we proceeded to scour nearby highways and byways in search of the restaurant that had been booked ...or any suitable restaurant for that matter. Soon after, one of the hosts

arrived by car to rescue us from the night and we then rather miraculously rendezvoused with our fellow auto-riders, at an incredible Persian restaurant, with wonderfully tapestried walls, which fitted the essential 'last-night-out' criteria of being new and trendy on the Mumbai scene. But more importantly, it had a vacant table!



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The farewell tradition – both amusing and memorable – had, once again, been re-enacted with aplomb, which started me down this track of considering the importance of detail, rather than the overview, when it comes to a country like India. The same probably goes for most places, but in this nation of maharajas and mystics it feels an especially relevant point to remember.

How much of this re-occurring detail will survive our modern age is a question for conjecture. Over the years I have been confronted by dancing bears and fortune telling cows, snakes, mongooses and hand-drawn rickshaws, the most of which have now disappeared from view. Extrapolating from there, I begin to wonder just how long the shoemaker's street-side stall, or the garlanded mini-temple will survive?

Only time – or perhaps Lord Ganesha – can answer that question.
