



Travelling in Tandem

There's something special about travelling as a twosome. Lone rangers harp on about doing it alone and merging with the crowd - they have the group selfies - but who do they compare notes with when they get back, their pet parrot? I've had my times of lonesome travel in out of the way places and yes, it can be invigorating, but on balance I choose the shared experience, in situ *and* for after the event: it adds cream to the cake.

Back at home, I lay on my bed, without fail every day, to do those exercises that will (perhaps in an after-life!) fix my broken knee: 1-2-3-4-5, 2-2-3-4-5, 3-2-3-4-5, I murmur to myself. Every time I lay there and look at the ceiling, I think of that tiny ground-floor shop in a little back street of Mumbai, where I would arrive every morning by auto-rickshaw, to get my physio-fix. My assigned therapist was a four-feet-something ball of instruction: beautiful in her daily diet of multi-coloured clothing and with a beguiling smile that gradually relaxed as time went by.

“Now do this!” ... she would snap, whilst miming the action. The instructions came with a bit of a bite at first (either to tell me who was boss in spite of her diminutive figure, or through exasperation at my slow speed of uptake). But the bark slowly turned to a much more soothing voice as the visits continued, so that by our last meeting, the day before my flight home, I was beginning to feel some sort of amorous attraction. In hindsight it was a total illusion; the lady was all business!

Each morning after the knee-mending sessions I'd rescue my sandals from the pile of shoes outside the physio's door, before clambering onto the back bench of another passing auto, then proceeding, spluttering and weaving (the auto, not me) to meet my daughter at our favourite fast food place, set on a corner, towards the far end of the same lengthy back street. On our first visit there my choice of the day was *Cheese Masala Dosa* and just by chance I managed to capture a sequence of stills which showed exactly how this delectable Indian snack is made. I was proud of the achievement and WhatsApped the results far and wide, with daughter, Alice, beaming at the end-product laid in front of her. The somewhat bemused staff looked on with faint smiles, as if perhaps expecting their call up to star in the next Bollywood blockbuster!



I returned to the same spot one day, alone this time (for some reason Alice was unable to make it) and chatted with a different chef, who managed to produce a *dosa* which tasted only half as good as the one that was by now on half the world's smart phones. It was the same place at around the same time of day, but as I sat there alone, watching

the passing parade of Mumbaikers going about their daily routines, it didn't seem such a special place at all. This street corner shop was exceptional, in part because we had discovered and enjoyed the place together: laughing and sharing our very own 'window to the Indian world'. It was a plus for tandem travel.

Though we live now in parts of the world far from each other, Alice and I continue a custom which started many years ago, whereby we meet for a few days or weeks, to enjoy the shared experience of being in a new locale. The habit began in Paris when she was still at school, with a second excursion to Venice soon after. Italy has scored two hostings, but India rings the gong with three marvellous experiences. Irregularly dotted over the past fifteen years, long may these travels in tandem continue.

Two or three years prior to my knee-bending pursuits in Mumbai, I found myself hobbling around the cobbled streets of Padova, in Italy, trying to find the way home. It was only my second day there, and I told myself I knew the way back, without recourse to maps (as most men are known to do!). The hobbling came about related to some critical keyhole surgery, after which came a stern warning from the specialist surgeon: *'Yes you can go, but don't walk too much'*. And the intention was to stick by his advice, the only problem being that I had now mistaken one famous church for another that was similar in appearance, but not quite so famous. So I walked around and around, unable to understand why I couldn't find the street Alice and I had used the day before. Finally, I unfurled a tiny map of the town and immediately realised my grave mistake.

Apart from the getting lost alone exercise, Padova was a paradise for convalescence and conviviality. It became a habit to stop for mid-morning coffees at *Caffeine* – a stupendous name for a cafe dedicated to





Padova street art by Kenny Random

supporting serious intake of the stuff, by all-comers (Brits included) – with its shaded seats that wandered out into the pedestrianised thoroughfare, it was hard to leave even after several foaming cups and sizzling pastries! On our way to and from our apartment and the high-octane coffee stop, we would often take different routes, to try to spot more examples of some marvellous street art, created by an artist who signed himself, *Kenny Random*. In some ways the art seemed to match the relaxed and laid-back feel that the town had to offer, which rolled on into the evening light, with succulent *porchetta* rolls from a

small stall in the central piazza, washed down with a tumbler of *vino rosso*.

Our intention was to use Padova as the residence and Venice (just 30 minutes away) as the playground ... but it didn't quite work out like that. After a couple of days, I said to my daughter: "*You know, it would be nice to chill out here in Padova for the whole week, rather than battling with the hordes in Venice.*" Perhaps not very complementary to Venice, which we had visited together in the past, but it was High-Noon in the summer season, and I knew the Grand Canal and Piazza San Marco would be heaving with people. She agreed wholeheartedly. And so we stayed ... continuing on to find 10 new Kenny artworks, some wonderful little local piazzas, and a whole lot more. For the few days we were there together, Padova was indeed paradise!

And then there was Istanbul: the city that straddles West and East. And in truth it does seem to do just that. In light of our own shared experiences – a small portion of which are recounted above, related to Mumbai and Padova - it could be said that Istanbul

presents as a combination of the two: the small alleyways and local haunts of Italy, with the flair and colour of India. Quite amazing! I remember finding, on our first day, the most captivating little antique shop, crammed to the brim with local memorabilia: some quite exquisite items and most of them not very expensive. It crossed my mind that if I lived in this place, I might have problems getting through my front door, because my house would be packed full of the best of those objects on offer.



On that first morning, and en route to the mosque of memorobillia, we had our first encounter with *Kahvalti*: or Turkish breakfast. What a revelation! That someone can put together vegetables, and egg, and cheese, and jams, and sauces, and much more, on one table, in a hundred dishes, washed down with a bottomless glass of black tea or Turkish coffee, made my mind go into overdrive! Here was I, ingesting cornflakes and porridge for the past umpteen decades, when just around the corner in Istanbul, a totally different and exhilarating world was there for the eating!

Alice and I are both bookworms, and part of my wanting to visit Istanbul was a result of an addiction to the renowned and prolific works of Turkish author, Elif Shafak. In one of her novels she had written about a *Kundera Café* – named after another famous author – which I presumed was fiction, but secretly hoped to stumble across whilst wandering the streets. My search was unsuccessful (of course) but there were so many other cafes, restaurants, bars and clubs, that finding the fictional one became an irrelevance. One eatery – a night-time cafe serving traditional foods at inexpensive prices – was especially inviting. The foods were behind a glass counter, with handwritten labels in

Turkish, so it was a matter of pointing and hoping! We were not disappointed. For a few dollars we shared one of the tastiest meals, with home-cooked flavours, in all our travels.

It's strange the things that stay in the memory when you return home from your travels: Mumbai exercise routines, Padova street art and Istanbul *Kahvalti*. Long may they continue ... both travels together and memories!



Better Together!

Photo credits: Duncan Gregory and Alice