

Stories from Our Journey to the East

#1 – Mumbai, India

In Nomad Letter 9, we promised stories from our journey to the East, the first stage of our quest to become better Global Citizens. We have wrestled with a range of ideas about how to capture the essence of our adventures to share with you. We have decided to write a series of vignettes that we hope will convey some portion of the amazing, astounding, shocking, eye opening, heart rending, thought provoking, and life changing events that we have experienced.

By way of introduction, let us take you back to the night in early March 2006 when we arrived at Mumbai International Airport. It is midnight, we have been flying eight hours from Frankfurt, but we are too excited to feel tired. We walk from the plane pulling our wheely bags behind us. These bags and our backpacks are our only luggage. We join the tide of people flowing through concourses into the large hall where people pick up huge suitcases and flow toward the passport and customs check point. Around us most of the people have dark skin, brown eyes and black hair. Many women wear saris. We are aware that we are the foreigners and that we are in a very different place! Yet we do not feel uneasy or unsafe because people around us are helpful and friendly.

After clearing customs, we walk out of the hall into a corridor lined with counters for currency exchange, travel arrangements and prepaid taxi. Ah, a taxi! That's what we need! A taxi to downtown Mumbai, about 25 Km (15 miles) away, is Rupees (Rs) 390, about \$10, but they only take cash. Blair changes a \$20 bill and pays. We receive a paper receipt with the taxi number and proceed outside into the night air, soft, warm and humid. It's a pleasant change from the damp cold of Frankfurt! Across a road is a parking lot with rows of little black boxy cars with yellow tops - the official Mumbai taxis. We find ours and the driver who loads our bags - one in the boot and one on the front seat, left side. We fit into the back seat and are soon on our way. It's now 1:30 AM and the streets are dimly lit and mostly deserted. Buildings lining the street are 2 to 5 stories, many with shops in the ground floor. People and dogs sleep in doorways or walk along the street. There is a general air of dilapidation and dust. There is no expressway, only a few flyovers, raised roadways above street level, that permit faster travel. After 45 minutes of travel, the buildings are larger and more stately and well kept as we enter the heart of Mumbai. We soon arrive at the Hotel Diplomat on the street behind the grand old Taj Mahal Hotel.

We are welcomed by the man at the desk who examines our passports and makes entries in a large ledger. A bellboy takes our bags and leads us to our room. It's clean, neat and best of all has a comfy looking double bed! Before long we are in it, asleep. We have arrived in India!

For the next 5 weeks we will travel across India from Mumbai to Agra, on to Delhi, then Varanasi, Kolkata, the Northeast Provinces and back to Delhi and these are the stories we have to tell.....

Our first morning in Mumbai, 12½ hours ahead of New Mexico time, we wake at 7:30 AM, feeling refreshed and ready to explore. After breakfast, Brian, Susan's brother, calls. He has spent the week with his Indian colleagues in Thane, a suburb of Mumbai, discussing a business partnership! He sounds pleased and happy! We agree that he and Umang, his Indian colleague, will meet us tomorrow morning and we'll explore together. Brian is becoming a Global Citizen his own way, through an international business arrangement!

The next morning, Brian and Umang arrive as planned. We're so happy to see Brian again - it has been a couple of years. We reflect on why we have traveled half way around the world to see each other. We meet Umang, a young man with flashing dark eyes and a ready smile, pleased to be able to show us his city. We start on foot, walking the block to the bay front and the Gateway of India (right top).



We first stop to visit the elegant Taj Mahal Hotel (right middle), with richly dressed people, thick carpets, gold and crystal chandeliers and mirrors, bountiful flower arrangements. Back outside and across the street, we meet a press of insistent postcard and flower sellers and women with small children begging, people strolling the waterfront. Umang buys us milk shakes at the state dairy stand assuring us it is safe; it was. After walking around the downtown area, Umang offers to take us on a driving tour that will end at the large shopping mall in Andheri where Brian can shop for gifts for his family. We will take a taxi back to our hotel.



So we are off, into the hectic traffic. We quickly learn that the marked travel lanes are only a suggestion and horns are an essential driving tool.

Our first stop is Nariman Point (right bottom), the financial and business center of Mumbai. Here are the modern glass towers of a 21st Century City! Mumbai has aspirations to be the financial capital of Asia but situated, as it is, on a narrow peninsula with the bay on the east and the Arabian Sea on the west, this city faces daunting space constraints. So far, they have not faced the challenging engineering that would be required to install a more extensive transit system, so the traffic congestion is dreadful, even on Saturday. After a stop to admire the curve of the coast line we continue our tour along Marine Drive north past glitzy retail stores and signs in English. Farther along, is the Bandra Kurla Complex, a new development of glass office blocks built on former wetlands. Umang tells us that the loss of wetlands causes destructive flooding each year during the rainy season. People never learn!



Not far from the glass towers of Bandra Kurla is Dharavi, the largest slum in Asia. This is home to an array of small businesses - potters, leather, garment and plastic industries. Thousands of people live here in multistory shacks with small shops in front. This is a real “mixed use” community that has evolved in a totally organic way with almost no infrastructure besides dirt roads, water from public wells, and electricity stolen from power poles draped with tangles of wires. This is our first introduction to the what we will call the ‘informal’ settlements of India. We find ourselves far more fascinated than repulsed!

Umang skillfully maneuvers the car through the tangle of cars, taxis, three wheel motor rickshaws, bicycles, large trucks and pedestrians with generous application of horn honking. We are happy to ride in the back seat and just observe! From the dirt roads of the slum, we pass into the broader paved streets of suburban Andheri where we stop to pick up Umang’s mother and continue on to the Mall. Inside it feels like America! There are multistoried stores packed with all sorts of merchandise for sale. There is also a food court and it is lunch time so Umang’s mother proposes we eat at a restaurant where they serve Thali on traditional metal plates. Here waiters in turbans bring an array of foods, sauces, nan breads, rice to the table and we eat whatever and as much as we wish. We are nearly overwhelmed with new tastes, savoring all.

After lunch, Brian’s shopping begins. He decides to select traditional clothes for Benie and the girls and Eli. We try to help but soon are overwhelmed with the shopping experience so we all exchange good-bye hugs and we go out to find a taxi back to our hotel. We bargain with a driver to arrive at the price, Rs 400. We climb in the back seat and begin what develops into an adventure.

We travel through neighborhoods on narrow streets past shops and houses, all somewhat dilapidated and ramshackle by western standards but we are starting to accept that many of the buildings in India look this way. Fresh paint is rare, concrete is the construction material of choice, and found or scavenged materials are the norm.

Dozens of black and yellow taxis and three wheeler rickshaws are parked along the streets. Most of these vehicles run on CNG to reduce air pollution. Based on the hazy air, this is a necessity! Our driver pulls into a CNG Station to refuel and asks us to advance him Rs 200 to pay. We agree and soon we are on the way again. We have adopted a new rule, “Trust the System!” The mass of vehicles on the roads works for millions of others, so of course it will work for us.

A bit further on, a policeman pulls us over and engages in an animated conversation with our driver. Soon we continue on, unsure what transpired. The street is lined with shacks where water is running from pipes at street level and people are filling cans and jugs and washing clothes and bathing there along the street. Women tend cooking fires and babies, young men hang out in groups, girls walk past in twos and threes, men move lumber and pipes using long carts pushed or pulled by hand. We look into the open doorways to see beds and tables inside. Sometimes nicely dressed people emerge. This is the real India! (right)



Finally, our taxi nears the Gateway of India and is stopped by a second policeman. We are close to our hotel so we pay the driver the remaining Rs 200 plus a bit more, thank him and wave good-bye, leaving him to deal with the cop. It has been an amazing expedition, first with Umang and Brian, then with our taxi man. We have had a big portion of "The India Experience."

In those first days we spent in Mumbai, we came to realize that this city of 18 million people is a giant assemblage of individual folks all trying to make a life for themselves. We quickly became fascinated by the range of sights, sounds, smells and tastes we encountered. We also learned that we could navigate to the places we wished to see by hiring taxis or three wheeled motor rickshaws, taking buses, trains and walking. If we became lost or disoriented, someone would help us find our way.

So after only a few days, India changed from a place we approached with apprehension to a place where every turn brought a new fascination. We were ready for the explorations we had planned.

We will continue to write stories and send them out to all of you. We'd like to hear from you, too. Please share your thoughts and experiences with us.