

## Chapter 5

# BACKPACKERLAND

**SATURDAY, 14 MARCH 2009**

‘You coming India before?’

If there’s one thing I have learnt from spending time abroad, it’s how to answer that question in third-world countries such as India. I’ve treated my lessons formally and paid attention to everything. I think I’m prepared for the challenges this country will inevitably throw at me since I have some experience. Perhaps this is my first mistake.

I’ve just landed in Delhi on my new machine-readable passport. I’ll never not be annoyed that America wouldn’t accept my old one. Anyway, in my pocket is the fattest wad of cash. It’s thicker than a cheese sandwich and doesn’t fit in my wallet. Needless to say, I’m not rich, even by Indian standards. The taxi tout standing beside me, who feeds on tourist traffic for a living, must have seen me exchanging my Australian dollars at the currency booth. He tails me through the empty arrivals hall and into a shop where I purchase a bottle of water, nattering about the kind of crap you wished people would stop sending to your email address. He’s trying to befriend me so he can make money. He asks for my name, what I do, where I’m from, where I intend to go in India.

He clears his throat and follows me outside, apparently not finished with his monologue. It's an enticing and silky-smooth word soup that he's feeding me, but not without its lumps. He radios for a taxi without asking me first. Behind these superficially twinkling eyes is an elaborate machine calculating what he can get from me. You cannot come to India and expect not to run into these kinds of people. I don't feel any anger or resentment. He's just trying to earn a living. To him, I'm a rich, white foreigner. Touts and unofficial tour guides see tourists as slot machines. Push the correct buttons, and money pours out. Newcomers generally disburse jackpots. Regular visitors do not. That's why this man is asking if I've been to India before.

'Many times,' I lie. 'And it doesn't cost 1,200 rupees to the city.'

The taxi-wallah laughs and says, 'Okay, for you, my friend, 600 rupee.'

It's still overpriced, but there are no taxis around, and it's dawn, so I agree and pay the tout. He bends down to the window and tells Drive where to take me. The sky is pink and grey, and city smog is merging with the early morning mist. The sun isn't fully up yet. Still, I expected heavier traffic and unbearable humidity, but the temperature is mild and the roads are surprisingly quiet. Small blessings.

Nearing Delhi Station, Drive glances over his shoulder. '500 rupee?' He taps his chest with his hand and holds out his palm.

'I paid at the airport.'

'No, me, 500 rupee?'

'Yeah, right.'

He looks annoyed and continues to hold his hand out.

We're close to my hostel because I can see the train station. He tries to tell me that he can't get to it.

Won't, more like.

'Stop the car!' I say. 'I'll get out here.'

'Huh?'

'I'll get out here.'

I hop out, dragging my backpack off the rear seat, and cross the road.

'Excuse me, Main Bazaar?' I ask the next pedestrian.

The man points to a dusty road lined with shops, their shutters pulled down, and I start walking between them along the narrow road, passing

snarling dogs roaming the dirty doorways with their tongues hanging out, desperately searching the bins for food scraps, barking at invisible targets. The potholed road is littered with empty containers and wrappers, pwoooar ... that offensive odour, typical of hot, third-world countries. Man, I love the smell of sewage in the morning. A couple of cycle rickshaws pedalled by old men, who try to tempt me with a ride, pass by, and then a lonesome, emaciated cow with a corrugated rib cage. Then I see a vertical, orange sign reading Vivek Hotel at the far end, and despite the misleading name, it's actually a hostel. A man with a turban and a large silver beard signs me in at reception, and a young boy shows me to my room. I thank him, fall star-shaped on my new bed, and try to get a few hours, lulled to sleep by the ceiling fan, traffic noise, and shop music outside my window. I'm tired. I'm hot. I'm nauseous. I'm back baby!

Back in backpackerland.

When I resurface around 11:00, I go for breakfast on the rooftop garden terrace with a view of Delhi's skyline.

As it's still my first day, I'm keen to exploit my anonymity and get among it. Life is so much easier when no one knows you.

Main Bazaar is heaving now. Pedestrians and rickshaws are trying to negotiate the crowds, among which are numerous traders haggling, making deals, and exchanging goods for cash. I've taken less than twenty steps from my hostel and I've already attracted an entourage. Dozens of hawkers, shop owners, and general opportunists, whose persistence both astounds and grates on my patience, are trying to flog me sarongs, ornaments, spices, hats, and tours to Rajasthan.

It's proper humid, and the air is filled with spicy aromas. Male Indians are chewing a mildly narcotic betel nut called Paan and spitting this dirty, reddish-brown substance to the ground, splattering potential tuberculosis. The road looks as if it's been pelted with blackberries. Several foreigners pass by, reminding me of Bangkok's Kao San Road. It's strange stepping back inside this chaotic world, where everything is new and nothing is predictable. I feel like I've been out of the travelling loop for too long and need to find my feet again. As this brown river of humanity carries me along, all my senses are super heightened, and I know I need to stay within

my depth and be wary of the hidden dangers lurking beneath the surface. But I feel alive, always in my element when I'm off exploring roads, cities, mountains, or nature. Right now, my soul is soaring.

Delhi Main Station is across the main road, so I'll go and book trains to Mumbai and Goa, but look at all this humanity, it's overwhelming here, a disturbed ants' nest. Crossing the street is a daunting task since it's three lanes wide in both directions without the lines, so drivers are just guessing and swerving everywhere to get ahead of the vehicle in front as though it's a race. There's no pedestrian crossing to speak of or traffic lights to break the flow. I find a vantage point and take a breath, watching how the locals just sort of float in and out of the speeding yellow and green auto-rickshaws and motorbikes, nonchalantly reading the traffic and timing their advance. Now it's my turn to play chicken and, like a dwarf at a urinal, I have to keep on my toes and be constantly quick footed. My head is darting from side to side as though I'm watching a tennis match on fast-forward, a high-risk undertaking, and I'm almost clipped by a wheel moments before reaching the other side, where I raise my eyes in silent thanks, discreetly sighing with relief.

The train station is a hive of activity, like the road, like everywhere. I take the stairs to the second floor, sit in front of a Sikh with a beard and turban, and reserve my train tickets. The first is for Mumbai, the second is from Mumbai to Goa.

Minutes later, I return to the road for another round of chicken.

I flag down the next auto-rickshaw I see. It stops abruptly, causing a symphony of horns and bells.

'Red Fort?'

Drive nods.

I hop in the back and settle into a comfy leather seat.

The show begins.

Drive's road skills take my breath away. Imagine being stuck in traffic, but if your vehicle stops, it will explode like in the movie *Speed*, so you have to keep the wheels constantly moving and find a way through. That's what Drive is doing now with super-human skill and awareness, keeping the rickshaw wheels rolling, despite the nonstop flow of cars, vans, bikes, and rickshaws coming out of every turning. I'm trying to suppress my smile,

utterly impressed that it almost has me clapping in the back, this absolute theatre, the way he tussles for tarmac space in the thoroughfare, missing vehicles by a hair, and just when you think there's no room to pass, Drive finds a way through with surgical precision. On Dolby surround sound, I've got the toots, chimes, blasts, and tinkles of countless percussion and brass instruments. It's not considered road rage. Indian drivers bib their hooters to tell other drivers in front they are near or about to overtake, like a kind of heads-up.

We arrive in what is known as Old Delhi. My hair is standing on end. I haven't checked every strand, but it's probably pure white. That was some ride. It should be a theme park attraction. Hop in a cab and let some Indian nutty bastard drive you around in a congested space for five minutes.

Red Fort is on the opposite side of the main road. There's actually a crossing here.

*Thank Ganesh.*

I enter the fort through Lahore Gate after paying my admission fee. Enormous red, sandstone walls stand at thirty-three metres. It reminds me of Windsor Castle, though clearly its architects did not attend the same college. The palace fort was built during the mid-17th century as the new capital of the fifth Mughal Emperor of India, Shah Jahan, serving as the residence of the Mughal emperors. The impressive fort boasts expansive courtyards, dark rooms in a maze of imposing red walls, and enormous geometric gardens at peak bloom.

On the way back from Red Fort, the tuk-tuk driver stops at traffic lights at a busy intersection. A lone beggar boy no older than twelve with stumps for legs is dragging his torso between the stationary vehicles with a look of desperation on his dirt-smeared face. He reaches up to the windows and holds out his hand for money. Most drivers ignore him or brush him off. He's too far from me, so I can't give him a donation.

On the other side of the auto-rickshaw, a sickly-looking young man with unkempt hair is collapsed on the pavement, his cheek pressed into the dirt. Little puffs of dust appear whenever he exhales. His eyes and mouth are wide open, as if in shock, but he's unable to pick his skeletal frame up off the ground. The floods of pedestrians on the footpath don't even notice he's there.

I know I'm out of practice, but my mental hard drive has reached its capacity, and my processor is beginning to smoke. It's a lot to absorb on only my first day back in backpackerland.