

## Letter from Bombay, January 4, 2008

This looks like I sent it from my office, but actually I am now in the back room of a telephone office in Colaba (a neighborhood in Bombay) where slow but working Internet connections are available for small amounts of rupees. I was desperate to hear what happened in Iowa<sup>1</sup> (and delighted by the result), and while I was here checked my e-mail and am now typing a sort of e-postcard. I haven't seen any actual postcards for sale, so maybe this will have to do.

Bangkok was hot and steamy (I traveled 26+ hours door-to-door to get there) but I saw some amazing things. The Grand Palace complex and the fabulous Italian marble throne hall in Dusit are two of the best places I've ever seen. Learning the Bangkok river ferry system, so I could buy the right ticket and know where to get on and off, was an adventure – a little bit of risk too when we hit a wave and I got a splash of polluted river water right in the gob. I kept waiting for the bloody flux to start but Lord Ganesha has protected me so far, that and a typhoid shot and Havrix. I could have spent longer in Bangkok, and seen some *wats* and taken a trip outside the city and its famous traffic jams, but that is perhaps for another time. I was just there to break my journey, and I was glad to get back on the plane and finally get to India.

The first smell of India when you step out of the airport is always a rush, and it was this time too. I said the Kali mantra all the way through the electrifying trip into Bombay – I would have said hair-raising but unfortunately it wasn't. Bombay is also hot and steamy but I have a breezy shady room on a high floor of a low-end hotel of the high-end class so I don't even need a/c in the room – as in SF the open window keeps me cool. I have been eating practically nothing but eggs and fruit and biscuits, although tonight I branched out and ate some baked chicken in the hotel restaurant. So far so good. My early morning idyll at the fish dock reinforced my practice not to eat meat or fish in India (chicken is different since that chicken was alive a few hours earlier).

I have been going around town with hired drivers and have ordered some clothes from a tailor and done some other shopping for various things I planned to get in India, and even spent a day on tourism (another tourist day tomorrow). I have been tracking down revenue stamps and stamped or engraved court papers and other relics with the arms of the princely states of India – I am learning quickly how to find this material, including old letterheads and similar debris of the past. It is an intriguing project. I have some pictures of princely state court stamps pasted in my pocket notebook so I can ask around without speaking Marathi or even Gujarati.

Fulfilling a vow, I did a great *puja* at the Mother-Church Ganesh temple called Siddhi Vinayek – very satisfying. It was a trip fighting past the shills demanding my shoes

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<sup>1</sup> [I was speaking of the Iowa primary, which started Barack Obama on his path to victory.]

(because I know from experience the shoe thing comes later), and squeezing down the line of people, more crowded than a NY subway, clamoring to offer their flowers and so on to the Brahmin *pujaris* who are taking it in as fast as they can and offering it on the altar and shoveling it off to make way for more, working hard like railroad firemen, while a temple full of spectators watched on closed-circuit TV. I got my offering in and got my *tikka* on the forehead from the *pujari*. Because I hardly eat in India (not trusting the food) my glucose level had fallen very low, and so it was great to receive back from the *pujari* the little sweet cakes that are given as *prasad*. Then I did the second part of my vow and found a very remote Ganesh shrine in a distant part of Bombay near a naval base, and made an offering there too. OM GANG GANAPATIYE NEMAHA!

I am settling into India as a familiar and well-loved place, which Bangkok for all its attractions wasn't for me. On my fifth trip here I really do sort of know my way around, even though I have never been to Bombay before. For example, now I know how to calculate from the obsolete taximeters what the real fare should be, so I just take taxis without problems or negotiations. But however familiar India seems, it is always really 75 times more unfamiliar. Bombay has more of its old architecture than many other Indian cities, and the skylines and building lines in almost any street are wildly foreign and surreal. I'm not speaking now of the British monumental buildings, which are themselves kind of surreal, but of ordinary back streets with carved wooden projecting balconies rather than the dreary concrete shells of Delhi. Looking for old court stamps in the back bazaars is great fun, just what I came here to do, and I have enough sense to get in a taxi and go back to the hotel for a shower and a snooze before it gets to be too much or too hot or too exhausting.

I am pacing myself so I don't collapse – Monday was *shabat*, a total day off spent in my room reading Philip Roth's superb *The Human Stain*; Sunday will be *shabat* again before setting off for the Gujarat journey. I will check in again after the New Hampshire results are in.

Feel free to pass this letter along as you wish.

David

## Letter from Rajkot in Gujarat, January 11, 2008

This is the first e-mail access I have had since my last letter. I am in Rajkot, a middling-small city (by Indian standards) in the Kwathiar Peninsula in Gujarat. I have been going around the state with my trusty copy of Hansdev Patel's *Royal Palaces and Royal Families of Gujarat*. With the pictures in the book my driver (not my first driver, who turned up drunk and almost killed a policeman, but my replacement driver) asks the way. Then I carry the book to the palace gatehouse, and am usually let in to see the rajah or the rajah's son and given tea and conversation and shown around. I have met with five of them so far and I am blown away by the courtesy and hospitality I have been shown in Limbdi, Wadhwan, Dhrangadhra, Wankaner, and Rajkot – Gondal tonight. Of course they all know each other, and Limbdi calls Wadhwan and says I have this American gentleman here, will you see him tomorrow, and Wadhwan says fine, and when I see him he calls Wankaner and says can you put him up tomorrow, and so it goes. Wadhwan is having the Italians build him a *mozzarella* plant to make cheese from the milk of his water buffaloes. This magic book gets me in everywhere – and, of course, help from Lord Ganesha, whose icons and *murtis* I see in every palace, and then I show the icon in my notebook to show I am a member of the Club too, and it is like a secret handshake.

India on the back roads is very different from the craziness of Bombay, but it is certainly crazy enough to keep a fellow alert. I have not seen a single foreigner since I left Bombay. I spent last night in the royal guest house at Wankaner and had dinner with the rajah (I use the term inclusively, including *thakor sahebs* and others – for details see page 94), who was environment minister in Indira Gandhi's government. All these rajahs are highly cultivated people who speak beautiful Cambridge English; I hope I am holding up my end of the conversations.

I have seen some other things also, besides palaces. I watched the oxcarts bringing in the sugar cane. I stopped the car to let the goats and sheep and pigs and camels pass me on the road. Tomorrow in Junagadh there will be a Hanuman temple where they have chanted the Ram mantra without stopping for 41 years or something – I plan to help for a while. The next day we reach the sea at Porbandar and I will take a day off – what is Gujarati for *shabat*? And then another week, including the Rann of Kutch. And then Udaipur and back to Bombay to pick up my clothes from the tailor and so on and buy some Indian state revenue stamps and watch the Republic Day parade and then stagger back home. I am tired but not reeling, and have not been sick so far, and I hardly feel like I'm on a trip anymore – this is just my life now. But it will be good to get back home.

*Jai Hind!*

David

## Letter from Udaipur in Rajasthan, January 21, 2008

This is my third and last e-postcard from India.

The Gujarat trip, with all the royal palaces, was terrific, but after about a week I had had enough. I was palaced out and sick of moving. However, I was also in a very remote part of India, so I couldn't just call it quits. So what I decided to do during my day off in Porbandar on the Arabian Sea was cancel the part of the trip planned for Bhuj and Mandvi and points north in Kutch (*Khachchh*) and instead make tracks for Udaipur a few days early. (I had to call the Maharajah of Kutch, who expected me, and tell him I was not coming.) So we arrived in Udaipur (my driver Mustafa and I) a few days early, after 10 days on the road instead of 14, and I had a week in Udaipur instead of four days. This was better both because it cut the road trip short (if 10 days and 2050 km over questionable roads can be called short), and because it gave me unhurried time to enjoy Udaipur.

When I say questionable roads, I am not kidding. On my earlier trips to India I have traveled on some bumpy potholed tracks. Now in many places in Gujarat and Rajasthan these are being replaced by gleaming new four-lane divided highways. The key phrase is "are being replaced," because they're not replaced yet. Instead the new highway is materializing in tiny disjointed pieces. So you bump along the track and then suddenly a lane of new highway appears. All the cars going both ways switch from the track to this new lane, which continues for a while and then stops. Then maybe the other side will appear, so all traffic in both directions, including animals, switches from the supposed northbound lane to the supposed southbound lane. The signal for this will be a few rocks across the road – each set of rocks prompts a decision – do we accept that this means *road closed* and switch to the other lane, or do we keep going on this lane expecting a place to escape will appear later? I got pretty good at predicting this. Then the new road completely stops for a while, until it picks up again at some arbitrary future point. Sometimes the old potholed road will go for miles, and then there will be 100 meters of completed four-lane divided highway (except for signs and lights, of course), and then nothing for a while. Or an elaborate overpass will be constructed with no road leading into it or out of it. Or vast earthworks and excavations continuing for miles, with abandoned modern earth-movers just sitting there, and concrete foundations with rusted rebar reaching to the sky, and no one working except maybe a couple of isolated laborers loading earth into wicker baskets with short-handled hoes. I tried for days to figure out why the Gujarat and Rajasthan governments, or the fancy German contractors whose signs appears on some of these works, would construct modern highways in tiny unconnected increments with all the attendant extra costs and delays. I still can't figure it out.

These were the main highways. Using the *Lonely Planet Road Atlas of India and Bangladesh*, Mustafa and I also picked our way along some tiny minor roads, single-lane

affairs through the thornbushes and outback that looked a lot like Indian reservations in New Mexico. The roads got us where we aimed for, although the villages mostly had different names than those shown on the map. Of course I couldn't read any of the signs, as they were in Gujarati, but it was fun doing it, and we came out where the map said we would. We even found our way on a road we knew had to be there, though it was not in the (2001) atlas. I have added three new Indian States, 20 new districts, and two more Union Territories to my life list.

Udaipur is a delightful town, without high-rises but with lots of cows. I spent a few days just resting and sleeping and reading novels, and then started exploring. I am staying in a nice hotel with a trustworthy rooftop restaurant, right across a small square (not square of course, it is a *chowk*) from a steep temple to Lord Jaganath (= Juggernaut) called the Jagdith Mandir. They sing *bhajans* every morning at 5:30, but earplugs and a carefully chosen room let me sleep right through. The hotel is in the heart of the old city, which is also the district of the curio shops, which I have been trawling for a special kind of old stamped court papers from the princely states. I have been making as much noise about this as possible, so shop-owners now stop me on the street and ask if I am the fellow looking for old court stamps. I show them samples (which I always carry with me) and ask do you have anything like this, not from Mewar (the old Udaipur State) or Jaipur which I already have, but some other state? I have come up with quite a few. Jaipur stamped paper is especially beautiful (the state seal shows Arjuna in his chariot, from the Bhagavad Gita)<sup>2</sup>, and the local curio industry uses them to put paintings on. People are surprised when I say I don't want any with paintings, and think I must want them to paint on myself. But strangely, that is not my plan at all.

The Udaipur City Palace is a marvel of Mughal-style architecture and decoration, and I have taken some boat trips on the famous lakes and took a taxi up to a castle on the top of the highest crag looking down on the lakes. I have watched the graceful but mischievous monkeys leaping along the roof-lines outside my window, and into the doors and windows along the way (I close the windows when I'm not in so they won't ransack my room looking for bananas and cookies). It is not hot in Rajasthan, although it will be hot again for my last few days back in Bombay, picking up the clothes I have had made and keeping some appointments to buy court stamps and watching the Republic Day parade on January 26.<sup>3</sup> And then home! I am eager to get home. This trip was about a week too long. But when I try to think which days of the trip I would have preferred not to have had, I cannot think of a single one.

*Jai Hind!*

David

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<sup>2</sup> [Actually the Sun Chariot of Surya.]

<sup>3</sup> [It turned out this parade is held only in Delhi.]