

A Railway Journey in Rajasthan

We were out of bed and into the hotel reception area for coffee and biscuits shortly after 6 o'clock, ready to start the next leg of our tour of India's Golden Triangle. Transfer to the railway station at Sawai Madhopur was by Canter, open top Jeep type trucks each holding 20 people. We'd used these vehicles yesterday on our excursions into the Ranthambore Tiger Reserve. It was already daylight and the streets were stirring with many locals making their way to work on rickety carts, on bicycles, or on foot. Emaciated cows with their ribs exposed wandered about the streets seeking to forage in the piles of rubbish which lay everywhere. The station was wide awake with many people coming and going. Actually it wasn't completely wide awake, there were still a few people sleeping on the marble floor of the concourse around the ticket office, wrapped in thin sheets or blankets. We took care not to trip over them as we made our way to the platform.

Our tour guide had previously told us that despite what we'd seen on British TV, our Indian train wouldn't be one where passengers are crammed in so tightly that the unlucky ones either hang on the sides or sit on the roof. This happens on commuter trains running into and out of the big cities. Our train would be a superfast express, and our carriage would be first class. We knew exactly where to stand to board it because the platform was marked to show where our carriage would stop. As we waited, I watched families with young children jump down onto the track from the platform opposite, cross the railway lines in the short time between trains travelling through, and climb up onto the platform where they needed to be. This was to save the effort of walking a few yards to the foot bridge, it seemed a bit risky to me.

We didn't have long to wait. All members of our tour group, 32 in all, were in the same carriage near the back of the train, but because of a mix up over the booking, our reserved seats weren't all together. The carriage looked to me to be about 50 years old or more, but it still had electricity supply points now being used to charge up mobile phones. I opened the window curtain next to me to see the view, but quickly closed it again. The window was horribly stained, I don't know whether on the inside or outside, I didn't investigate to find out. So this is what passes for first class on this line. The passengers were a mixture of obviously rich Indians and tourists, mainly our group. It seemed that those already on the train had been travelling all night, many were asleep. The comfortable brown high back reclining plastic seats in the carriage were arranged with 3 and 2 in each row with the aisle between. My wife and I were allocated seats a few rows apart but as it turned out the two seats next to my aisle seat remained unoccupied.

There were a lot of comings and goings up and down the aisle for the entire two and a half hour journey, mostly men selling food and drinks of various sorts, mostly local. Many wore coloured tee shirts displaying the name of their catering company. They balanced boxes on their heads, had trays hung around their necks, or carried flasks by their sides. As they walked down the aisle they shouted out whatever they were selling. The only words I recognised were "tomato soup" which was served from a galvanised bucket. Other attendants came and went sweeping the aisle or mopping it with a damp and dirty rag tied on the end of a broom, no doubt spreading germs from one place to the next. I've never seen this amount of well intentioned cleaning on British railways. The seats had plenty of legroom and fold down tray tables in the seat backs, so it was easy to eat our pre-packed breakfasts supplied from the hotel. I had a cheese sandwich (it would have been two but I dropped the first on the floor), two boiled eggs (I ate one), a packet of cream and chive crisps (should the packet have said cream cheese and chive?), two bananas (I ate both), and a carton of mango juice to drink. I enjoyed it all. At this stage in the holiday my wife was wondering whether she was starting a tummy upset so she didn't eat anything. As it turned out she was fine.

Time passed quickly, I didn't see much of the countryside because of the closed curtain, but I was happy to watch people moving around. I've been surprised on this holiday by how bright, clean, colourful and fresh the ladies' saris are. Towards the end of the journey we were visited by the ticket

inspector, a tall and very serious looking Indian gentleman with short black hair, wearing spectacles, a dark business suit, white shirt and tie, and carrying a clipboard with lots of papers on it. He was probably in his mid-forties, and definitely not the sort of fellow you'd want to cross. He spent ages in our carriage. He inspected the individual tickets of the native Indian travellers and our group ticket. He counted the number of people in the carriage, I guess 80 to 100, and cross checked with his clipboard manifest. Not satisfied, he counted again and re-checked some of the individual tickets. We left him still puzzling over the numbers when we alighted the train at Bharatpur. India is famous for its bureaucracy as taught by the British Raj. It seemed to me that the ticket inspector fitted in well, demonstrating bureaucracy in practice.

The journey had been interesting, enjoyable, relaxing, educational and a lot better than the alternative. Before leaving home we'd been advised that we might not be able to travel this leg of the journey by train because of an administrative problem, the New Delhi agent had forgotten to book the seats. Instead we'd have to travel by road, but by way of compensation, lunch en-route would be provided. A free lunch didn't seem to me like good recompense for having to sit on a coach for six hours.

The exit from the station was on the platform across the rails. I noticed that no-one in our party was tempted to jump down onto the track to cross it, instead we all walked the length of the platform to the foot bridge. I tried to take some photographs whilst keeping up with the group, but it was difficult. On my own I could happily have spent at least half an hour or more just photographing people, I'm sure I could have taken some good shots of Indian life. I particularly regret not taking time to point my camera at one of the windows of a second class carriage. It had bars but no glass, and an elderly Indian man with a heavily wrinkled face and wearing a turban was looking out. I wish I'd stopped to get this shot and if I'd lost the group, so be it. They probably wouldn't leave town without me, would they? But instead I hurried on and boarded our coach without delay, the photo opportunity gone. On reflection I now resolve that in future I'll take opportunities as they arise and won't worry about the consequences. This might be an irresponsible attitude, but I might just get some great photos.

Postscript

As I write this, news is breaking of a major railway accident in northern India. It happened at 03:00 hrs this morning in Uttar Pradesh, just to the east of where we were. More than 115 passengers are dead and 150 injured. Photographs on the news web-sites show that the derailed overnight express train from Indore to Patna looks identical to the one we travelled on. It's reported that train accidents are common in India where much of the railway equipment is out of date. Early speculation as to the cause of this accident includes a fracture in the track. There are about 23 million passenger journeys on Indian railways every day, in 2014 there were 27,581 deaths on the network. That's a lot of deaths.

Had this rail accident happened before our trip, and had I been aware of the poor railway safety record, it would not have affected my attitude to our train ride. I would still have gone on it. Even before reading news reports today, I judged that the railways can't be any more dangerous than the roads, largely because of the very poor standard of driving and even poorer maintenance of vehicles and tyres. Our Indian tour guide told us while we were travelling by coach on a motorway one day, that to drive in India you need the three Gs: good horn, good brakes and good luck. I don't believe that good luck lasts forever, so wasn't surprised to read in news commentary today that whilst the Indian railways might have a very poor safety record, you're still five times more likely to die on the roads. Happily this isn't something I dwell on when I book holidays.