

**The Cockroach Clause  
Writers Link 2001**



***Author Mark Piggott and his partner Lynda are in India on the first leg of a three month round-the-world trip. Their tickets from Bridge the World cost just 901 pounds sterling each, including six stopovers, and a total of 29,000 flying miles with Qantas and British Airways. But some people are never happy...***

I used to think that I could change the planet just by traversing its exotic limits. I was the Holloway Hemingway, a round-the-world revolutionary with all the right visas and jabs. Now that I know the bittersweet truth I can sit on the papier-mâché balcony I have constructed with travellers cheques and Kingfisher Lager and snarl at the pushy Kashmiris trying to sell me the clothes off their children's backs.

I am a tourist. There is no difference between me, a backpacker, an explorer, a globetrotter, a Guardian Netjetter, or some whitey with dreads half-arsedly

doing bad tai chi and bad acid on Dead Dog beach at dusk. This gives me something I choose to perceive as an advantage over people like the dismal Dane or arsehole Afrikaans in the Panaji, Goa branch of Thomas Cook: 'I've had enough of this crap!' he snarls through his ginger beard at the dignified woman behind the counter. 'All I ever get over here is bullshit!' Our friend thinks that he has been wronged somehow: he has lost his traveller's cheques. He is shouting because he is white; angry because she is brown. The back of his filthy T-shirt sends this cheery message to the world:

What the *fuck* do you want?

\*

'I'd like to leave the country,' sang the Stone Roses, 'for a month of Sundays'. We wanted to leave behind England, though not necessarily London. Follow me? We weren't the only ones. On the plane out of Heathrow an Indian went plum-crazy, so they shackled the varmint to a monolithic British Airways skinhead. Injun made another commotion when we landed-his conscience plaguing him? -at Bombay, which for some reason is now called Mumbai. Waiting at immigration, we all watched as the airport staff slapped and punched him to the ground. I looked around at families with children, laughing.

I have been to India before. For some reason I was even proud of this fact. I have seen the Taj in a powercut, Calcutta in the rain, travelled thousands of miles over the flat Ganges plain by shite bus and train, bragging at how I 'went native'. I was experienced. I recently decided it was time to inflict some of this experience on Lynda, a kind of initiation, or perhaps a trial by ordeal to see how our relationship would cope. But a lot has changed in seven years, for India and for me. We travelled first class by

train, and booked our hotel in Mumbai over the internet. And now we were here, ready for adventure.

We took an Ambassador cab from the days of the Raj with two fresh-faced Utah saints trying and failing to get back to Mormonville on standby. Would it be racist to note that every single Indian driver is crazy? Possibly, but I have known many. Not that they aren't safe; I've never had an accident yet (though I've seen many). Through the largest, most impressive slums in Asia, watching Lynda's face for reaction (not much; but then, she's from Kirkby), suspicious of how naïve our country cousins were, to the cosmopolitan (I mean, safe) suburb of Colaba. Bentleys Hotel: a 'Western' toilet, hot shower, satellite TV with 80 channels of shit. Sleep.

\*



First, the birds: crows mostly, pigeons and even sparrows greeting the raucous dawn. Then cab horns, bells and chants from the Hindi temple and muezzin calls to prayer, bike bells and traders waiting for daylight: but, unlike Delhi, no rickshaws, no camels, and no buffalo wandering the sewers. There

are workmen outside our window, hanging off precarious bamboo scaffold, who seem to do nothing but stir leaded paint and (relatedly?) hawk up phlegm, while skinny cats and fat dogs are clubbed to the ground by the heat.

\*

Not a good place to be, India, when you have a fear of snakes. And Lynda's phobia is extreme, to say the least; Rolf's Animal Hospital a roller coaster of emotions every time Rolf says:

'Some people have more exotic pets...'

The Gateway to India, or, according to your orientation, your point of view, to the Arabian Sea. A man advances on Lynda with something thrashing limblessly in a blanket. (In Calcutta it was a beggar, thrashing limblessly in the sun.) I have gone ahead to check for (Judith) charmers, and this charmless wonder leaves Lynda in tears. It is my 34th birthday.

\*

Imagine an earthquake hits, let me see, Luton: divide the dead by twenty (India's population times ours) and it's still a thousand, but in London, where statues wobble, still we rush about with briefcases. It could be.

\*

Here is a ditty about Bombay:

*In Old Bombay*

*Where I once lay*

*As the workmen spat phlegm on the pavement;*

*Where the windows had bars*

*'cos of rats big as cars*

*back in Old Bombay.*

*In New Mumbai*

*Once more I lie*

*'neath a fan which spins slower and slower;*

*My arse is a pain*

*So we take the train*

*Thru' Maharashtra mists down to Goa.*

\*

The night never seems to end. By day the beach is too busy, but at night lying on a hard bed you awake a dozen times: each time the waves, the fan, footsteps and insects seem to creep closer, until you're awash on a raft surrounded by dangers which are only dispersed by the sun. Tsunami dreams...



Michael Burke: 'A holidaymaker from Britain has died while visiting India. Mark Piggott, a minor novelist of no great means, who was from the London area, was staying at a cheap resort in Goa when the mysterious incident occurred. Mister Piggott was devoured by flying sharks while trying to escape by motorized parachute a rickshaw driven by malarial cockroaches. A cognac with dinner tonight Pierre, I think.'

You become aware of how remote from 'civilization'-what, Holloway Road? C'mon-you are-hundreds of miles from the city, with no police to protect you, the anarchist, just a handful of rich whiteys in precarious huts, and thousands of hungry locals eyeing our money belts with envy. The Arabian Sea might be full of pirates, with scythes between teeth, doing hit-and-run up the coast. Try telling them you're poor in England. From the poorest kid in town, to the richest. But then I think: fuck it, it's cheap.

\*

In the next beach hut, refugees from the Sixties play Fleetwood Mac, Jethro Tull, Pink Floyd. Wish You Were Here? Welcome To The Machine, more like. They should look up to the

sky and watch the motorized parachutes buzz the wind (our waiter calls it 'fast air') like mosquitoes.

That's where we all are, the privileged few. Then they should look down, to the bus station at Panaji, a Supertramp-shanty town of genuine refugees, from the Noughties.

As I recline imperiously and pretend to be a writer, Lynda really is washing socks in a bucket in the sun. We share our hut with two geckos, which in our anthropomorphic English way we have christened Gordon and Gertie. For all I know they are Gordon and Graham, or Gertie and Glenda, or a name more Indian; they might be hermaphrodites; there may indeed be dozens of them, or they might not be geckos at all.

But what I do know is, they aren't following the lettering of the contract. They are supposed to eat all the mosquitoes, the flat, fast-slithering centipedes, and whatever else spends its time trying to climb into my orifices all night, and I don't feed them to the ugly crows outside. The only clause to this contract regards the cockroaches, because they are so much bigger than the geckos we sometimes mistake them for the bed.



Things you can see on a Goan beach: women in saris kicking footballs, men who are supposed to be selling authentic drums staring unselfconsciously at even less self-conscious Western women bathing topless, a man with no neck muscles holding up his head with both hands, fat hippies in luminous sarongs, a beggar who staggers through the café

and waves leper stumps at you, soft old dogs which follow you home, posh Chelsea boys who get ripped off at every turn, the ear-man who attempts to insert a spike through your head, power cuts. This could be California. Floating above the paddy fields in an Indian helicopter, flashes of colour all around: painted elephants, greedy buffalo, colonial villas ruined by the sun and the vines. Everywhere we visit becomes short hand for somewhere else, other paths we have travelled: the blue/white houses of Panaji could be Portugal, the sleaze and sloppy pancakes of Calungate Benidorm, Vagator and Chapora's Hampstead posse smugly smoking bongos on the beach with cows Kohs Samui or Pha-Ngan. Travelling nowhere, but eating well; fish curries swell. Only I go to India and gain weight.



\*

Anjuna beach flea market: more hippies who don't get it, and hawkers who occasionally do. Camden Lock with added sunshine. Lynda's refined ears prick up: on the beach we watch a king cobra's impotent hoodhead

weave. Snakes are deaf, they just go with the flow. As do we all; not an Arabian sea breeze after all, but the well thumbled leaves of a million Lonely Planets, without whose received wisdoms this place wouldn't exist.

'Seems I'm not alone in being alone; hundred billion castaways looking for a home'.

(Sting, Message in a Bottle).

Anyway, must dash. Lynda just screamed, and now I know why.

There's a spider the size of a camel doing a wheel of death round the toilet bowl. Oh yes, one last thing.

Confession time. I don't know exactly what 'colonial' means; nor do I know the names of 99% of the plants which surround me; and I have probably ploughed halfway through my life's allotment, with all seeds up to now cast on stony sods.

**Ends.**