

July News Bulletin from Goa

Greetings from Swanage, where I am now visiting mum. This is the last of my news bulletins from Goa, at least for the time being.

During most of July the monsoon rains continued unabated, resulting in the potholes getting deeper and the added problem of not being able to see them due to the roads being flooded. The herds of 'traffic police' wandering down the centre of the road plus all the dogs that often sleep in the middle of the road also made driving very difficult. However, at least the animals are fairly predictable in their behaviour and often get out of the way as you approach, unlike the motorcyclists and car drivers who do the most unexpected things on any side of the road. Fortunately most people are not in too much of a hurry in Goa and the driving is fairly slow and relaxed, although you have to be prepared for any eventuality and learn to anticipate the unexpected.



Towards the end of June the children and teachers were back to school and I wasn't needed quite so much in supervising kids and organising resources, so I decided to take a few days holiday with my friend Rob who was also out working as a volunteer. Despite being at the beginning of the monsoon season, we had surprisingly good weather, staying in Agonda, a lovely quiet seaside village in the south of Goa, completely free from tourists, but with many friendly residents and shopkeepers to talk to. We stayed with a very nice family renting two big double bedded rooms in their house with the sound of the sea sending us to sleep at night. In the village there were also several small general stores, plus a barber, a school and even an internet cafe. The beach extended for over a mile, and was fringed by palm trees hiding the foundations of many beach huts that would have been occupied in the tourist season. However the sea was very rough and the current was too strong to swim in, so the many lifeguards on duty (probably made up from half the youth population in the village) had nothing to do other than prevent the very occasional visitor from going in the water.



All was set up for a very relaxing break, spent reading, walking, fishing and enjoying the home-cooked food at the local cafe. But on the second day I was driving along the rough track adjacent to the beach, when I was distracted by the appearance of ants on the car dashboard. I took my eyes off the road and as I tried to get rid of them I suddenly hit the end of a low wall that had caused the road to narrow in front of me. Although I was going very slowly and there appeared to be very little damage to the body work, the front wheel had taken the impact and the steering mechanism had got bent making it impossible to drive. Fortunately the locals were very helpful and I got taken on the back of a bike to find a mechanic. He was able to make it temporarily driveable in order to take it to the local car dealer 30 miles away, although I was rather concerned about my safety on a busy main road.

Having booked the car into the garage 3 days in advance and bought the part that the mechanic said needed to be replaced, I had hoped that it wouldn't take long to get fixed. Unfortunately I spent all day at the garage, waiting for various people to attend to the car as it got passed from one department to another, and was eventually told to come back the next day because they hadn't managed to fix it. Instead of taking a two hour bus journey back to Agonda, I decided to walk to the nearby seaside resort of Colva and spend the night there so that I could easily get back to the garage the next day. Having wasted one day hanging around at the garage, I decided to make the most of my time in Colva, and wait for the garage to contact me when the car was ready. I was even on the point of resigning myself to another night in Colva when I received a phone at 5 pm saying that the car was eventually ready.



As far as the cost of services is concerned there is certainly nothing to complain about. Several hours of repair work to the car, including replacement parts, came to about £50, while the cost of spraying the bumpers after the damage I caused was only £40. A trip to the local car valet for a full clean cost me less than £3, although in the monsoon rains washing the car is not really very necessary. Even the banks try to give you good value for money, as proved by my friend Rob who recently went into the bank to change some pounds into rupees but forgot to take his passport. The bank manager paid for the cost of a taxi and went back with Rob to the flat where we stay, so that he could pick up his passport - simply so that he could change £30. What bank manager in the UK would go to such extremes? The greatest price saving compared to the UK is at the barber. A haircut followed by a head massage only costs 30 rupees, equivalent to roughly 40 pence, and they don't even expect a tip. That compares with £10 at my local hairdresser in Scotland - at least 20 times as much.

With the beginning of a new school term I recently took 3 children to the barbers for a last minute haircut. Normally one of the older boys cuts their hair, but they had (conveniently) forgotten to mention that their teacher had insisted on it being done 'by tomorrow', and now it was late in the evening. Furthermore if they return to school the next day without having it cut the teacher will sometimes get the scissors out themselves, and the result is much worse than having one of the boys do it. So they end up quietly asking me when they're not supposed to - it's fine when there are only 3 but if I were to treat them fairly I would end up paying for 120 children every month and that would be quite an expense.

Things often take a long time to organise in Goa and no one seems to take the initiative in getting something fixed. In the school appliances are often plugged into sockets using bare wires and power cables sometimes trail across the floor with a join in the middle. A nearly new washing machine lay idle for a couple of months simply because it needed a new dial, and when the water pump stopped working it took 10 days for someone to come and replace it. Meanwhile the children had no running water in order to shower or flush the toilets and living in the home became a serious health risk.

As soon as I see something that needs attention I like to do something about it, and I am very grateful that people trust me to take the initiative and get on with jobs that need doing without having to ask permission. Recently I overhauled all the computers in the school office, updating them with the latest system, and fixing wooden boards to the walls where there were former windows into the kids sleeping area. Before doing so, the children were always disturbing people in the office by poking their heads through the hole in order to see what was going on, or coming in when they weren't supposed to and going on the computers/internet. Now the room is secure, is no longer a temptation, and offers a private place for staff to meet.



With some children not returning after the holiday, others transferring into the mainstream state school, and some new arrivals to the orphanage, there were quite a few changes to be made to the Rising Star School classes. Furthermore two of the teachers had moved on, so classes have had to be combined. This is not too much of a problem given that class sizes have intentionally been kept fairly small (between 7 and 14 in number) in order to try and best help children who have never received any formal education or who have some learning difficulty. It would be easy for me to agree to take a class whenever the school is short of a teacher, but I have been very careful to say 'No'. Otherwise I could easily end up doing lots of things that I didn't plan to do on top of all the things I came to do. And I have found that in the past, the more you do for people, the more everyone expects of you.

One thing I did recently say 'yes' to was showing the Rising Star School children a film on a Saturday morning instead of their usual classes, but rather than the usual Bollywood movie or childrens film, (often produced in very low quality on a pirated DVD), I decided to show them some high quality David Attenborough films, beginning with the 'Life' series. While some of the older ones were taken in small groups for cooking, I took the rest on the open roof area of the school and set up a projector with a big screen and speakers. They were absolutely captivated by the films, especially the younger children who obviously hadn't seen anything like it.

At present there are 7 classes organised roughly according to their age but also taking into account their ability. This ranges from a Kindergarten for pupils aged 3-7, and a 10th standard class for children aged 16-19, with 5 classes catering for children in between (ie. studying at I, II, IV, V and VII standards). With frequent power cuts resulting from storms and heavy rain, not much work gets done. The rooms are very small and with only a small window they become very dark inside. Football and cricket still continue though, whatever the weather, and even though the cricket field and football pitch is no longer usable due to long grass or flooded goals, the boys use the back yard of the school to play cricket and the hard tennis court near the big boys house to play football.





The girls don't have the same outdoor facilities at their home, but they are equally good at making their own entertainment and often seem to be having lots of fun whenever I arrive to see them. They also have their fair share of power cuts and were recently without electricity for several days due to the fact that the whole house needed rewiring and no electrician wanted to take on the job. The girls went outside and showed me how every time they tried to push the mains switch back up after it had tripped sparks would fly across the wires of the neighbouring electricity poles.

As with the other two homes, I visit twice a week in the evening to lead them in a time of singing and bible study. As soon as I arrive they welcome me with shouts of 'Tim Uncle's here' and then all 50 of them will gather in the living room, sitting cross-legged in neat rows on the floor and listen quietly and attentively as I share with them. They love singing, have very tuneful voices and know a large repertoire of songs off by heart. After sharing thoughts and prayers with them, it's time for their evening meal to which I am always invited. They take me into the dining room, sit me down at a large table while they sit on the floor, and lavish me with huge quantities of food, despite my appealing for half the quantity I had last time. Their cooking is often quite spicy compared to the boys food, but is always very tasty despite the fact that ingredients are limited by what they can afford – always rice with some sort of curry made from pulses or meat, plus vegetable bhaji.



With only a few days left in Goa before leaving for Mumbai and London, I tried to sample as many local products as I could find. Depending on the season, different foods are available on the streets, and in the monsoon season, sweetcorn sellers are to be found everywhere. These are delicious having been roasted and coated with lime juice and chilli powder. Other common Goan dishes to be found at roadside stalls are deep fried onion bhajis, various puffed puris stuffed with different ingredients, and cutlet pau, made from minced meat and spices and accompanied by a bread roll (pau). When I arrived in Goa I was warned about eating food at the roadside, but I have since thrown caution to the wind without contracting any stomach bugs, and now, just as I am about to leave, I have become quite a fan. Besides, many of the street stalls offer the best in home cooked food and therefore give you a much better impression of local cuisine than going to the local KFC. (At least there are no MacDonalDs yet!)



I particularly enjoy going to the local cafe in Santa Cruz for a break after school and relaxing over a cup or two of chai (made with whole milk and sugar). A cup consists of a small glass or metal container and is usually insufficient for quenching your thirst on a hot day, but at the cost of 5 rupees or 7 pence a cup, two cups is not overly extravagant. Recently the local shopkeepers and their clients have started to become quite friendly, having got to know my face, (there are very few westerners at this time of year), and it is great to sit and chat to the local Portuguese descendents about how life in Goa has changed due to the influx of Indians from other states who in their eyes are exploiting the quiet and laidback lifestyle of Goa. The cafe also does and a very good Pao Bhaji, a quick meal served in a small dish comprising of vegetables in a spicy gravy, served with a bread roll. If the cafe is closed then the bakery is often open, serving a variety of cakes and tasty patties (small pastries) filled with beef chicken, egg or vegetables. A very small but pleasant place to sit, eat and watch people come and go, but unfortunately, no chai for sale here.



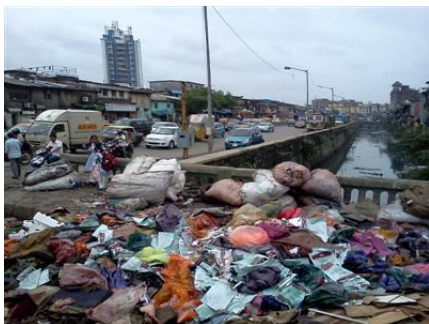
While I was in Goa and Mumbai I was amazed to see how popular the food halls selling western meals had become with local Indians. I assumed that once you had become used to eating hot Indian food your taste buds would not appreciate anything milder, but by 10.30 every evening of the week the food halls are packed with families sometimes with very young children. They always seem to eat very late in India, and young children seem to stay up late even when they have school the next day.

Getting to the airport for the flight to Mumbai was quite a rush in the end, even though I thought I had plenty of time. I had forgotten to check the departure time from Goa, and had been telling everyone my arrival time in Mumbai instead. I ended up leaving the big boys home an hour later than I should have done, but fortunately there wasn't too much traffic on the road and I was able to make up time by driving quite fast. When I arrived in Mumbai there was no one to meet me, and I had no credit on my mobile to phone anyone. There was nowhere in the airport to topup, and I certainly wasn't going to venture out of the airport with a heavy case, especially after my last experience. However someone kindly lent me their mobile phone and I was able to get through to someone to organise a pickup – it turned out they had forgotten and were very apologetic.

I spent the next two days as a guest of Vision Rescue, a project organised by a pastor in the New India Church of God and a brother of the couple who run the orphanage and school in Goa. Accommodation was in a Catholic retreat centre, a very quiet location 15-20 miles out from the centre of the city, but each morning I was picked up by one of the project staff and taken to Vision Rescue's headquarters. They operate four big school buses which they have converted into mobile classrooms seating about 50 children. Each day they go out with teaching staff to some of the worst slum areas in Mumbai and give the children a 40 minute lesson followed by a meal and any medical treatment they may need. They have even purchased uniforms for the children who regularly attend. Each bus goes to the same 4 or 5 slums each day, keeping to a regular timetable so that the children know when to expect them. They get an enthusiastic response from all the children who seem so eager to learn, and soak up everything up like sponges.



It was really quite an education for me, travelling to the biggest slum in Asia, visiting a refugee camp for families who were outcasts from Bangladesh because of leprosy, and experiencing for real the actual area where 'Slumdog Millionaire' was filmed. Having already seen the film, I realised that the life portrayed was no exaggeration, with children scavenging for food on mountains piled high with rubbish. However I had to be very sensitive in taking photographs and was not allowed to wander far away from the bus, partly because the team did not want to risk inciting any negative response towards their work in a such a sensitive area, and partly because they were very protective of me as a guest and felt responsible for my safety.



On my first day out with Vision Rescue the bus I was travelling on broke down and wouldn't restart after visiting the first slum. Together with children and adults from the community we tried to jump start the bus by pushing it from the front and then the rear, but in the end we gave up and had to be rescued by Vision Rescue's own rescue jeep. For the remainder of the day we just transported food and distributed that to the slum children who would have attended the classes. However that same day the jeep ran out of diesel on our way back to the centre and we had to be ferried back by car. On the second day, I went out once again on one of the other buses, and saw similar extremes of poverty alongside some of the richest areas of Mumbai where the stars of Bollywood and cricket stay in hotels that look out over the slums. I was amazed to find out that Vision Rescue only cover 1% of all the slums in Mumbai, visiting only 20 slums out of a total of 17,470 in Mumbai alone.



At the end of my second day I decided to venture out into the city alone. The bus had ended up at a slum near to a train station and although I didn't know exactly where I was going I decided I would head south in the direction of the city. I bought a ticket for 5 pence that would take me to Mumbai Central but made the mistake of getting into a carriage that was fairly empty compared to all the others. I only realised why when I read the notice. It said that it was reserved for handicapped and cancer sufferers and that anyone not eligible would face 5 days imprisonment. Needless to say I quickly changed carriages at the next station. I walked the streets of Mumbai and bought a map so that I could at least get back to the 'Vision Rescue' headquarters.

I didn't have that long to find my way back and the management team were apparently very concerned when they heard that the bus staff had let me go alone (They had no knowledge of my capability in finding my way around an unknown city and felt responsible should anything untoward have happened). In the end everything worked out fine and I had a great time exploring some of the city. I managed to fill my lungs with fresh air as I walked along the sea at Marine Parade and then headed via taxi to the awe inspiring Victoria Central station from where I was able to take a train back towards the headquarters of 'Vision Rescue'. It was quite a long journey - about 30 minutes - and only then I did I begin to realise how big Mumbai was and how far I had travelled on buses and trains during the day. Everyone was surprised but delighted to see me, while I was left wondering what all the fuss was about.

It's good to be back in Swanage, Dorset and to have some time relaxing with mum, before going back up north. On the way I hope to visit friends in London and Inverness and stay with my uncle and aunt in Wrexham. Then it's back to Orkney and teaching music once again, although this time I'll be staying with friends in South Ronaldsay, while my house in Finstown is being rented out. It's rather strange adjusting to life here. My time in Goa has gone very quickly and, having been so busy right up to the last minute, I feel as if I have suddenly been transported to another world. In all my time away there has not been a dull moment - on the contrary, life has been full of unexpected surprises and unforgettable experiences.

One good thing about being back is missing the long winter and arriving straight back into midsummer. Suddenly I find that the daylight lasts 6 hours longer, and the torrential rains have come to an end. However I do find it hard having to pay the prices for food, drink, clothes and services - £1.50 for a tea bag waved in a cup of boiling water with a dash of milk, hardly seems good value. The other day I went round several cafes in Swanage searching for any drink that would cost less and couldn't bring myself to buy anything. And I've still to go to the barber and be charged the equivalent of 20 haircuts plus a tip - perhaps I could wait until I get back to Goa in October. As for driving, I'm not sure whether I'll ever re-adjust - so you'd better look out if you see me approaching!

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