

Rajasthan, India



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An early vacation

About the 20th of December, New Zealand "closes" for the summer.

No one heads off on vacation quite yet. There's still the matter of the Christmas lunch with the family. Yet, by Boxing Day, there's a mass migration away from Auckland. This is the part of the year I like best because there's almost "no one" left in the city. Barring essential services, everyone seems to be headed out of town.

Which is when Renuka and I also take our break.

We'll stop work around halfway into December, making sure to stock up on the beer, chips and lots of books. Then we'll settle in for the quiet of the city. By the time we get back to work, it's the tail end of January.

Hence, February is hardly the time to go on another vacation

When we first got to New Zealand, we were keen to explore the country, and February seemed like the perfect time. However, as the years passed, it seemed better to travel in the cooler months. Hence, we'd be more than likely to travel to Northern Hemisphere in spring, somewhere early in April.

Except, this year, my brother was planning to visit New Zealand in April

Though we'd lived in Aotearoa for over two decades, he was the only one in the family who hadn't been to this part of the world. He'd gotten as far as Australia, but New Zealand was still that island too far. We knew he had limited opportunities to get away; hence we decided to take our vacation early and head to India.

India hasn't always been our first choice as a destination

As we started taking our vacations, we first explored the Americas. North America, then a bit of South America. The US, Canada and Argentina gave way to Europe. Italy, Spain, France, Greece and the Netherlands were the places we most frequented. Then Cape Town and Vietnam, and possibly the rest of Asia, came into closer focus. India wasn't high on the list.

However, we had to be back in New Zealand because of my brother's visit.

There wasn't much point in heading to Europe. India, with its cool winter temperature, seemed to be the right in-between destination. Strangely, for the first time in years, I was excited to go on a holiday. The reason for this sudden surge of exhilaration was because I was just getting used to my new camera, the mirrorless Sony A7R III. For several years, going on vacation seemed to be something I did as a matter of routine. Once I'd get on the plane, I'd be relaxed, but the pre-travel excitement seemed to be gone forever.

The thought of taking pictures—especially in Rajasthan—was all I could think about. I couldn't wait to get to the airport, get on the plane, and head to India. We'd stop over in Singapore because that's what we always did. Instead of taking one long trip across, we religiously stop "midway" and move on to our final destination.

Yet, the chaos of Indian cities is not exactly my cup of chai.

Though I'd lived in Mumbai all my life before I got to New Zealand, the city's pollution gets to me almost instantly. Ten years ago, I stepped out of the airport for just a couple of hours only to find myself coughing shortly after. Hence, when we get to Mumbai, we don't leave the airport. However, there's no bias against Mumbai alone. All Indian cities are choked with smog, and the winter air keeps the pollution chained to the ground. Hence, we picked all of our hotels far away from the city.



If it was more than 46 minutes away, it was worth our while.

46 is just a number, but it also dramatically changes the landscape. Buildings give way to the countryside, and villages seem to sprout along the way spontaneously. Most importantly, the air is a lot cleaner.

Rohet Garh was our first stop, and our room was spacious.

"That's the room Madonna was in," said the manager as he showed us to our room. All very impressive, we thought to ourselves, with thoughts racing towards our first chilled beer. That February, and for a tiny slice of March, we worked our way through Rajasthan having the time of our lives.

As it turned out, my brother didn't come to visit, after all. As we left India, the gates slammed behind us. A new virus, one that went by the name of Covid-19 was about to make its presence felt.



Sean D'Souza February 2020



A wedding party swept through the streets of Bishangarh, a village 70 km away from the city of Jaipur. Suddenly the relatively quiet street was flooded with music and dancing. I love weddings. I'll show up at any wedding and I probably have pictures of weddings no matter where I've been on the planet. Often, however, it's just a bride or groom readying themselves for a photoshoot. This one was different because like most Indian weddings, the party starts on the street, before retreating to some wedding hall, where the food and festivities continue.





These pictures are shot at 8000 ISO. If you're a photographer, you know exactly what that means. It means the person taking the picture has either forgotten that they're on the wrong settings or that they don't have a clue what they're doing. I had no idea what I was doing with the camera. All I knew was I had to somehow get the picture and that's exactly what I did. If you zoom in a lot, however, you'll see there's a fair bit of noise. That's what you get when you shoot in bright sunshine at 8000 ISO (Note: 125 ISO would have been more than enough).



Even though I grew up in India, there's no way to guess the customs of a local village. When I saw the wedding procession wind its way through the streets, I was sure the veils would stay on. But to my utter surprise, not only did they remove it, but they even stopped and waited patiently while I took some pictures. My discomfort with the camera is not obvious when you look at the photos above, but I was desperate to just make sure I got something. Yet, almost like I was the official photographer, they turned towards me, and yes, I was delighted.

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Two happy mothers

I was on the street in Bishangarh, Rajasthan when this young tribal woman called me into her courtyard. She wanted to take a picture of her son, who was probably a year old. The house she lived in was just a thatched hut, much like people would have lived in a few hundred years ago.

We were in Bishangarh for a whole week, and I'd been walking around the village taking an endless number of photos. And when you're a traveller, you stand out. She would likely have noticed me walking around the village many times, which is why she called me in.

At first, I was puzzled. Tribal women can be notoriously conservative.

They use their saris as veils, keeping well away from men—and definitely strange men with cameras. Then I realised she wanted me to take a picture of a little kid. She wasn't keen on the house as the backdrop, so she got a bright towel, and we had a photoshoot in progress. And everything went just fine until I stopped clicking.

"Can I have a print of the photo"? She asked.

I explained the best I could that it was just a digital camera and we couldn't have a print. She was puzzled. It was hard for her to understand why a photo didn't just pop out from the camera itself. We were at a sort of stalemate.

I couldn't give her a print, and that's the whole reason she'd asked me in. I fell back on a plan I'd used very well in my travels. I asked her if she could send me a message on WhatsApp. Phones and data themselves are very cheap in India, and over 300 million Indians use WhatsApp regularly. But she wasn't one of those people.

She was so poor that she didn't own her phone and wasn't sure if her husband had WhatsApp. I offered to give her my phone number anyway, and she raced inside to get me a piece of paper. That's when we realised she didn't own a pen, either.

We had to call a kid from next door, who was on her way to school, and ten minutes later, we had a pen, but she didn't have her photo.

Bishangarh is a tiny village.

Perched to one far corner of the village is a warrior fort. It was built to keep warriors on the ready and is located about 70 km from the city of Jaipur. The warrior fort was an early warning system and comprised of warriors prepared to defend any incoming enemies.

Over the years, the fort fell into ruin and was occupied by bats, parrots and monkeys. However, the village continued to exist around the fort. In the past three years alone, the village has grown in terms of modernity. There's still no piped water, and every drop of it has to be collected from a central water point. Electricity has made its way. But the village has no restaurants, and most of the stores are for everyday agricultural goods. There was no way we would get a print of the photo either in this village or anywhere nearby. The closest place we could think of was Jaipur, 70 km away.

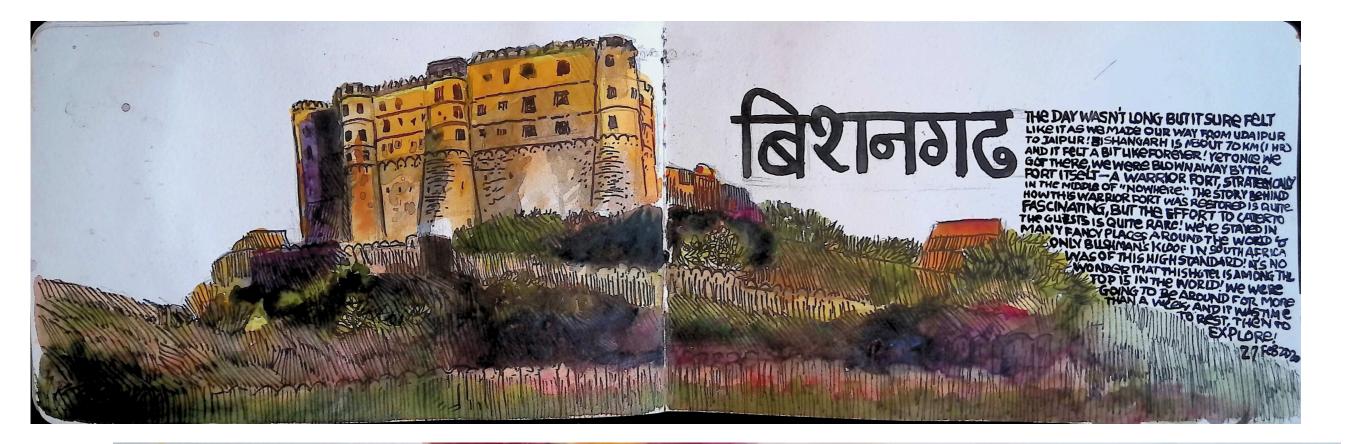
Luckily fast broadband exists at the foothills of the Himalayas or in remote villages such as Bishangarh. To get this print, we had to send the file to Jaipur, where someone would go out and get a photo.

A couple of days later, that print was hand-delivered to the hotel. At which point, another employee of the hotel took over. She would need to locate the tribal woman and deliver the photo because we were moving on to our next destination.

Two days later, the woman had her photos.

It took about four to five staff members, fast wifi and a visit to a photo store, 70 km away just to get a simple photo. But it made one mother very happy. Actually, two—when I think about it. I'd taken some other pictures on my walk around the village. And we figured if we were going to make one mother happy, we might as well make two happy. There you have it-two happy mothers in Bishangarh.





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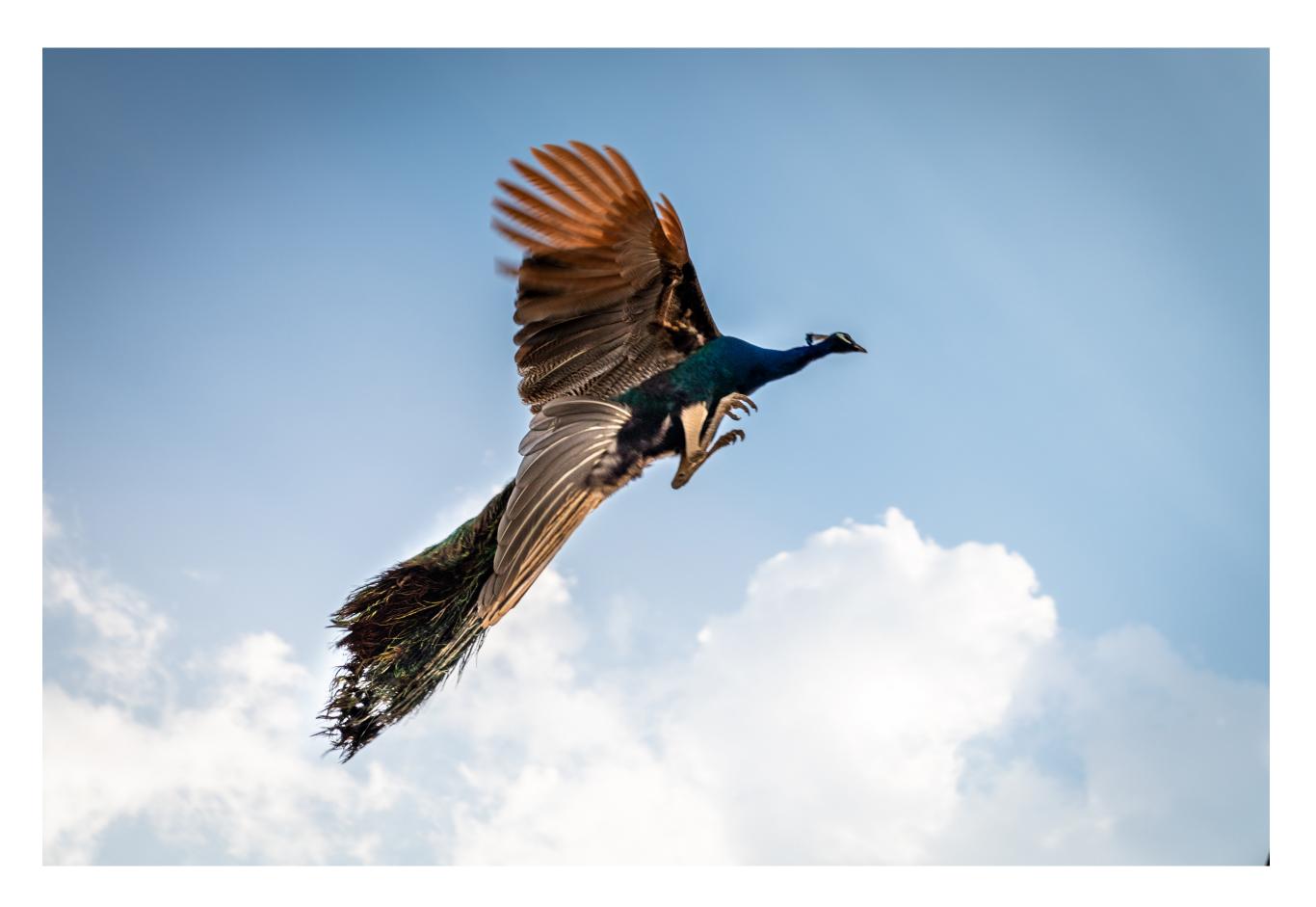
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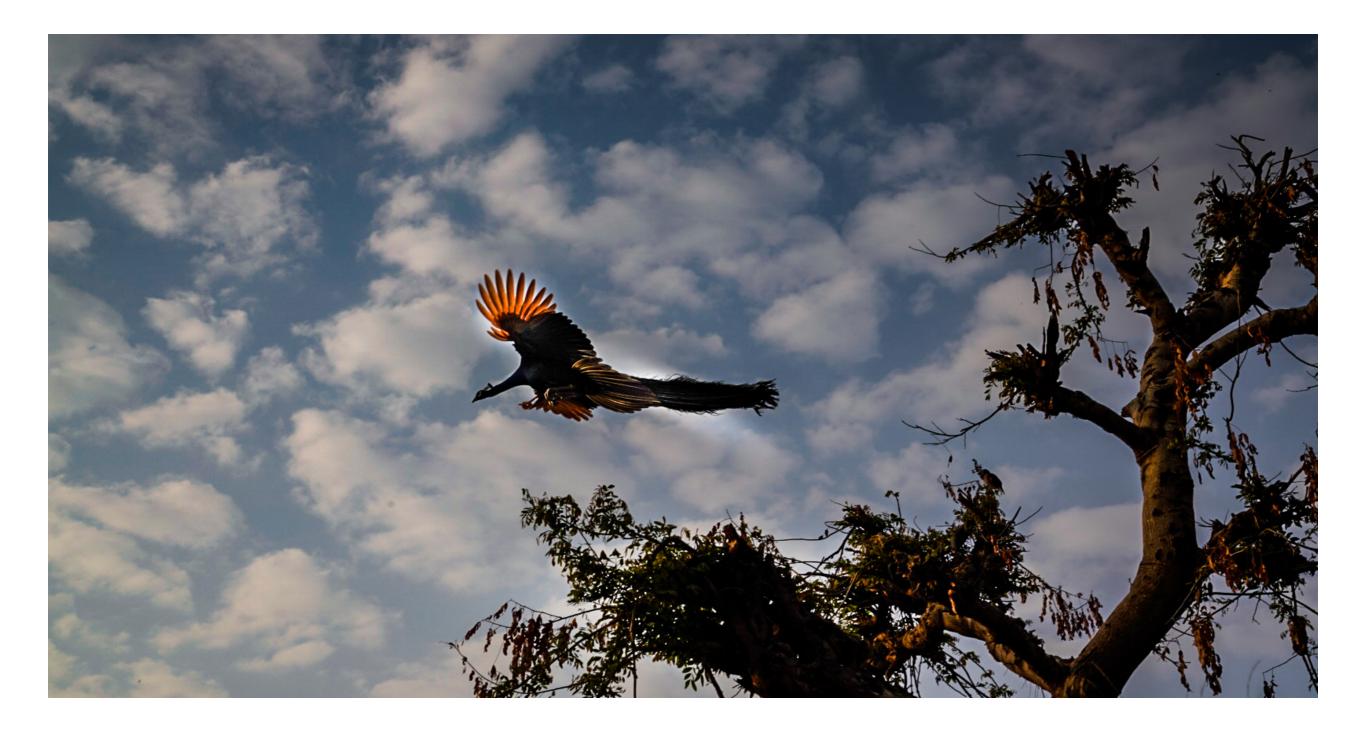
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A HEAD MASSAGE! HOWNEVER, I HAD TO REFUSE THE TEA ATTHE BALBER'S SHOP. JUST SO I COULD HAVE THE TEA AT RAMESH'S PLACE!'HE MADE REMUKA DRINK THE SWEET, MILKY TEA TOO- MUCH TO MY AM USEMENT (SHE HATES THE SWEET, MILKY TEA'S LATER WHEN WE'D STOP FOR TEA, HE'DRIVERENUKA A TINY PAPER CUP VERSION, ALMOST AS A CONCESSION ! HOWEVER THE TEAGUY WHO WAS NO MORE THAN EIGHT-TEN FEET AWAY, AND HAD HIS OWN STALL WAS ADAMANT THAT I TASTE HIS TEA AS WELL! SOMENOW WITHOUT FRYING TO, I'D STARTED UPA TPA-WAP IN THE WITHOUT PRYING TO, I'D STARTED UPA TEA-WAR IN THE VILLAGE! LUCKIU, WE WERE LEAVING SOON FOR GOA!

AS I WALKED THROUGH THE VILLAGE See THINGS I'D NEVER SEEN BEFORE DE BEING PARTOF THE INDIAN LANDSCARE FOR 70 YEARS 'ONE OF THE EXPECTED SIGHTS THE 7 RESENCE OF GOATS, HOWENER, THE EARS WERE LIKE NOTHING I VOSEN THEY SEEMED TO HAVE THESE BIG PATCHES THAT MADE THESE BIG PATCHES THAT MADE THESE BIG



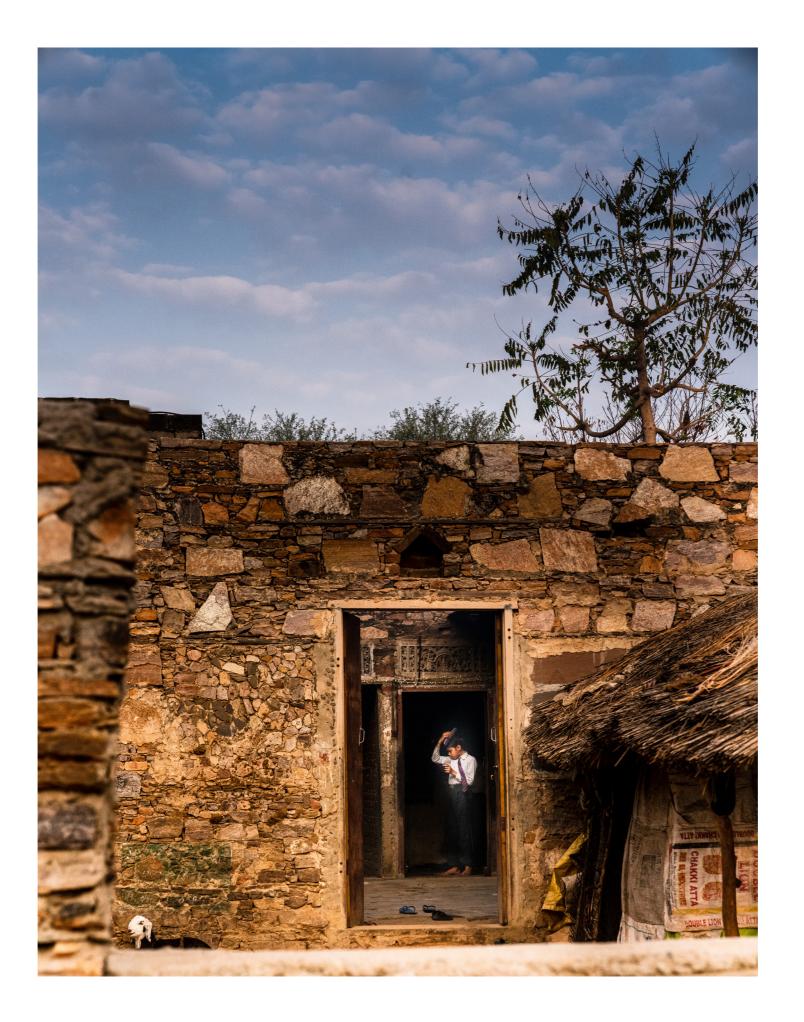




For many Indians, chairs are an optional piece of furniture. Should you decide to sit down, you simply squat and continue the conversation for as long as needed. I tend to wander around early in the morning and they were still feeling the cold from the night. It seemed like a pretty straightfoward chat, but in fact the man with the orange cap was grieving. His hair has been shaved, as his father died. While Hinduism is generally very liberal, the concept that a cremation should be done by the eldest son is rooted in the Garun Puran - a Hindu religious text that deals with funeral rites. The text is believed to be at least 1,000 years old. The book though is silent on the role of women and does not forbid them from funeral rituals.



The buffalo was ill and was running a slight temperature. Which is why the lady of the house had a covering on the animal. Plus, his diet had been changed. The baby buffalo, however, well, felt like he needed attention as well.







As I approached this group of card players, they asked me why I was taking pictures. "Why do you play cards," I asked in return. "For fun", one of them said to me. "That's also the reason why I take pictures," I replied. "Why don't you join us?" they said, making space for me and puling up a chair. One moment I was on the street, looking inside. The next moment I was in their inner circle. Some of them played, others watched the game and drank masala chai. One of them showed me a problem he'd been watching. It was the entire series of the "Mahabharata" on YouTube. This moment was important to me, because I realised how easy it was to get into anyone's inner circle, in mere minutes. The knowledge has served me well as I've gone on other photo adventures.







Headed home after a long day in the field with a load of hay. Indian motorcycles are routinely used to transport all kinds of things and the size doesn't matter.



Indian cities tend to buzz with activity early in the mornings. By 6 am, at least a few breakfast establishments will be well on their way. In this picture, the person in the foreground is deep frying a mild chilli coated with batter. Sure beats cereal, or jam and toast. Though you can get that as well, just a bit later.







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COLD, WE DECIDED TO HEAD TO RATASTHAN OUR PLANN ING WAS A LITTLE ODD, BECAUSE WESTARTED IN JADHPUR THEN WE HEAD TO UDAIPOR & FINALLY JAIPUR! THAT'S A BIT WONKY, BUT IT PROVED TO BE COOL!

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WHAT TICKLED ME WAS HOW IT WAS SOLD - NOT BY PRICE BUT BY WEIGHT INSTEAD ! KISHAN THEN TOOK US TO HIS HOUSE FOR A CHAI, AND GAVE US A TOUR OF THE WEAVING THEY DID! HE WASTODRIVE US THE MEXTON TO WAIPUR - 4 'ZHOURS AWH!



Despite a multitude of airlines operating in India, the hubs are still a bit of a pain in the neck. Jaipur (where we started) is located about 340 km (about 211 miles) away from Jodhpur. It's roughly a six hour trip, but if you take a plane, it could last all day. The flights fly to a hub, usually New Delhi, before heading back to Rajasthan. Hence, we decided to get there by car. I'm quite happy driving in India's chaotic traffic. I almost find it meditative. However, having a driver makes a huge difference, because the chaos can be unpredictable. Sudden detours, changes in traffic, a tyre puncture—just about anything can ruin your day. The driver was keen to get back home early, so we made the trip in less than the allocated six hours. This is one of the views from the car.











A smoke break from chopping wood. The tools being used to chop the wood were more like a chisel and hammer than a traditional axe. Breaks were definitely needed.



Epilogue

After Rajasthan, we headed southwest to Goa.

After a magnificent trip to Rajasthan, we were finally on our way to Goa. Goa is on the west coast of India, flanked by endless white-sand beaches, coconut trees and a largely easy-going lifestyle. There was no direct flight from Rajasthan to Goa, so we had to stop for a while in Ahmedabad.

And as part of the trip, we had a choice of sandwiches or nuts.

I'd already eaten a sandwich on the first leg of the trip, which is why I opted for the nuts cashew nuts in particular. Cashew trees are common in Goa, and when I was a child growing up, we'd see the cashew fruit almost everywhere.

The fruit is juicy, but if you've eaten one of them, you're pretty much done for a lifetime because it's not particularly tasty. Instead, the fruit is used to make a liquor called "feni", which Goans love. And yes, there's the nut—that tiny little nut.

A tree might produce about 2-3 kilos of nuts in a year, which means you're eating the nuts of an entire tree when you chomp mindlessly into that packet of cashews.

But back to the flight.

There I was, mindlessly chomping the cashews partially because my attention was focused on the container. It was a lovely pink tin box that most kids would love to play with or at least store something in. When I was growing up, I liked all kinds of containers, and it seemed like a colossal waste to throw the tin away after eating the cashews.

We were seated right in front, which means that the air hostess was nearby most of the time.

This air hostess was a live wire: Chatty, warm, the kind of person you take a liking to, right away. We were seated right at the front of the aircraft, which meant we could have little conversations. There I was wondering what to do with the cashew tin, but Renuka was already clear about her game plan.

She shared her idea with the air hostess. "How about putting some sweets in that box and giving it to a child on the plane. Tell them it's a special gift".

Most health and safety staff would bristle at the thought of food contamination.

However, rules are meant to be broken, and this air hostess was more than a game to play along. She put the sweet in the box and gave it to a delighted child. The parents were happy, the kid was ecstatic, and it was such a cool thing to do.

Renuka thought up a plan for the airline too.

"How about locating where all the kids are seated on the flight," she said. And then announcing the seat numbers and saying, "Seat 25J wins a special prize".

If there are 5-6 kids on the flight, those kids will be excited beyond belief, and it will spread a great deal of cheer among the adults, too, as they see the tricky but lovely plan being put into action.

The flight landed. We were whisked off to our hotel near the river.

But we had a cashew tin story. Unfortunately, as things stand today, many airlines will go out of business. That lovely air hostess will need to find a new job, but we have no doubt she'll be fine as she has the right instincts and is a warm, wonderful human being.

From that point on, things got real very quickly.

India went into lockdown almost the day we left for Singapore. Two days later, as we flew out from Singapore to Auckland, those gates shut behind us as well. A week after we got to New Zealand, the country went into a two-month-long lockdown.

I still keep in touch with the people I've met.

As I take pictures, I get their contact details. Whatsapp, because it's so ubiquitous in India (and probably the world), is an easy way to keep in touch. Tailors, drivers, staff at the hotel, even the general manager—they're all a message away. Never before had I taken people's details in this manner or sent them photos. In the past, I'd probably have taken someone's e-mail on a scrap of paper, only to discard it once the pictures had been sent.

Now, almost two years later, I'm still in touch with most of them. The cashew tin has a good home. The tiny villages in Rajasthan may not have changed much.

We'll just have to wait for another day. Perhaps another year.



Sean D'Souza and some of the kids from Bishangarh. This photo was taken by one of the kids, who quickly learned how to use my camera. If you want to see lots of cartoons, recipes and yes, other stuff that Sean does, you can head to https://www.psychotactics.com.