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THE LONG WAY HOME

Swapping a 3-hour flight for a three-week journey from Assam to Kerala, novelist Zac O'Yeah tries to tap his inner 'yatri' from a window seat on Indian Railways

Over the last 10 years, I have been airdashing up and down India, and in the process I have started missing the country. After all, airports are exactly the same everywhere. Besides, there's that worrisome thing about the carbon footprint and how one contributes to global warming with each flight. On my most recent trip, I flew to Assam in 3 hours from Karnataka without seeing anything but clouds. So, on the way back, I decided to take the slow route—a three-week train journey with stops along the way to eat local and see the sights, the way I used to in the 1990s.



ALAMY

As a fledgling travel writer, I used to clock up almost 25,000 rail kilometres annually travelling around India, rarely able to afford anything better than a sleeper-class ticket. Perhaps I was feeling nostalgic and wanted to reconnect with that younger me—half my age and so full of energy that a little hardship didn't come in the way of enjoying a good trip.

Call it a midlife crisis or a whimsical choice, either way, I made a spur of the moment decision to cross India by train.

GUWAHATI-KOLKATA

After a salubrious sojourn in the greenery of Meghalaya, Guwahati seems to steam like a pressure cooker. If one likes long rides, trains from the station here run to far-off places like Jammu (2,430km) and Kanyakumari (3,715km). Each year, over eight billion passengers travel on the 20,000 Indian trains that connect 7,349 stations, but I am no longer sure I will enjoy this as much as I had imagined. It's an awful long way from here to Mahé (from where I will take a bus home to Coorg), exactly 4,010km as I add up the mileage of the five tickets I have purchased (for ₹1,935 in non-AC sleeper class). Am I insane? Probably.

Everybody has warned me off unhygienic railway grub, so I meekly fortify myself with mutton curry and fluffy chapatis at one of Paltan Bazaar's alwaysopen eateries just behind the station. I philosophize that according to traveller wisdom a journey is often more important than its destination. This is an existential battle in which I must recover the railway vagabond that I was decades ago before I started writing jet-setting travelogues for glossy publications.

I grab my backpack and board the rust-coloured behemoth which is going to crawl to my first stopover, Kolkata. As I stash my stuff on to an upper berth, my trepidation is mitigated by the brand new coach—the Kaziranga Express is a recently introduced service. My co-passengers turn out to be a jolly band of Bengali ladies, coming from Guwahati's Kamakhya temple and going to Kolkata's Kalighat Kali temple to get blessed by potent profeministic forces. It makes sense to journey by train, to sit together and sing hymns, which wouldn't be feasible on an aeroplane.

Soon, I understand how pointless it was to eat before boarding. The train has its own pantry car and waiters in bright orange uniforms tempt passengers with hot biryani. I am stuffed, so I make do with Assamese lal-sah, black tea served with lime, and first-rate mishti doi which, though not in an earthen cup, is packaged hygienically and tastes authentic.

The sun sets early in the North-East, so after an hour there are no more views of the Brahmaputra valley, but a cloying scent of the river lingers, mixed with the zesty burps of passengers. Within 20 minutes, the ever-present waiters take dinner orders. A freshly cooked meal of "Rice (150gms), Chapati (04nos.), Dal (150gms) and Mix Veg. (100gms)" costs a fraction of the embalmed sandwiches of low-cost airlines. Trains are still about eating, like they used to be 20 years ago, though there are differences— nobody's smoking and the pantry crew doesn't supply optional quarts of cheap booze from pocket stashes.

The night is cool in the airy sleeper coach and I am only disturbed by a lonesome mosquito at a station where the train idles at dawn. If I were at home, I would be heading to my desk, but on the train I relax for as long as my body likes to, until nature beckons. The first two toilets have run out of water, the third is clogged with previous business, but the fourth is inviting and I do the needful as well as take a face bath, having carried my own soap and towel.

Outside, dreamy landscapes of green paddy fields and lotus ponds look straight out of the Apu Trilogy, Satyajit Ray's cinematic epic, but it's getting hotter and my mind visualizes the coming afternoon's Park Street-pubbing. Impatiently, I check the RailYatri app; the train is running 2 hours late.

Some things never change but the app consoles me with the fact that other trains run late by tens of hours, so I take it easy and order breakfast in bed from the cheerful waiters, double-egg omelette with bread slices (₹40). The devout ladies buy luchis from a halt that according to RailYatri is Malda town but which my GPS identifies as English Bazaar—maybe a shape-shifting ghost town? I am tempted as I observe them dip the greasy breads into oily potato curry, but perhaps this is the iffy intestinal lubricant I have been warned against. A newspaper-seller hops on board with North Bengal editions. I read about the railway's offer of "circular tickets". Apparently, a tour around India can be done for as little as ₹1,500 if all journeys are booked in one go and the trip ends where it started.

Early afternoon, a hijra startles me by fondling my behind and I wake to the song of a baul minstrel. Another man sells colourful shoulder-bags. In the 1990s, hawkers peddled smuggled Chinese cassette players and pirated DVDs, but now passengers carry pocket entertainment in their smartphones.

At the neat, newish Kolkata station, I bump into a German backpacker and we share an Uber to Park Street—she tells me she took a gap semester from university, but that was three years ago and she's still doing Asia on a shoestring. She gets off at Park Street's cheapest backpacker dorm, while I cross the street and take an elevator to the Glenburn Penthouse, a sumptuous boutique hotel with a handful of exclusive suites, an opulent tearoom and a rooftop infinity pool overlooking the Victoria Memorial. I sample in-house plantation teas as the sun sets beyond the Hooghly.

KOLKATA-VISAKHAPATNAM

After two days of classy Bengali dining at Glenburn, barrels of beer courtesy Park Street's pubs, and meandering about Kolkata's heritage quarters, I say goodbye to the blissful penthouse and hit the rails again. I step out of the AC comfort of my Uber into the deluge of souls that spews out of Howrah station and virtually swim upstream against the gazillions getting off trains.

Once inside the hall where India is camping out on the floors, I find an enquiry window and my platform is one of the last—number 22. I launch into the human tsunami, tagging along with an uncle frailer than me, and eventually can't move in any direction. I wind up squeezed against a pillar while the wiry uncle is jostled off in the wrong direction. I have bitten off more than I can swallow and begin to choke.

But minutes later the trainloads have dispersed and I join an endless single file of voyagers trotting through a darkly medieval construction area past cement blenders and makeshift temples and trafficjammed porters struggling with overloaded carts. Pushed from behind, I am pressed through a labyrinthine route to another set of platforms from where southbound trains leave, and Gita Press and Wheeler bookstalls welcome me back to civilization.

I get a feeling I will survive this too.

Shortly before the Yesvantpur Express is expected, something miraculous happens—the milling hordes transform into an orderly queue (aided by two policemen). Even a rat gets into line before grasping its mistake and scuttling off. One man says his friends and he are travelling south unreserved, looking for work. A sociable fellow

tells me that he's from the Sunderbans and is going to Bengaluru to check on his son, who works there. He poses triumphantly for my camera.

My coach is crammed to the rafters with fortuneseekers who have reserved tickets, but no confirmed seats. They fill the vestibules, toilets and luggage spaces, but luckily I have booked an upper berth, which is an easily defended position and too narrow to share even if Madonna turned up berth-less and promised to lullaby me to sleep. A gang of ladies enter, ogle me, a Muslim co-passenger relishing non-vegetarian and a techie playing a semi-pornographic game on his big-sized phone, and decide to squat elsewhere.

The mayhem peters out as the train settles into a chugging rhythm. On my perch, 2m above, I feel a rare existential calm: I am no longer thinking of the 999 daily worries of life—job, money, family, friends, unfriends. For the time being, this train is all that exists and it's my whole world.

I sleep until 8am, Visakhapatnam when I hear a vendor offering whisky, but as my head clears I catch him shouting "biscuit". The scenery outside is jungly with bulbous hills. We are crossing the Odisha-Andhra border land. At stations the puri-sabzi has been replaced by wholesome idlisambar. However, five migrant labourers travelling on the floor only eat puffed rice from a huge plastic bag and share one toothbrush.

At 8.32am, my phone pings, welcoming me to Andhra. Maybe it's the contrast with Howrah, but Visakhapatnam's station strikes me as traveller's ecstasy: tidy platforms and AC lounges, where for ₹150, passengers can sit in comfortable easy chairs, use free Wi-Fi and hygienic bathrooms, have free snacks and read free newspapers. Wah!

I chill out at the towering Novotel in Varun Beach, Visakhapatnam's choicest address, with multiple restaurants serving spicy local seafood and a rocking nightlife. During the day, I explore the beaches that are not as swimmer-friendly as Goa, but have a strong surf that makes them perfect for water sports. People still talk of the Hudhud that flattened the city in 2014 and alert me to a new monster cyclone heading towards the coastline.

VISAKHAPATNAM-HYDERABAD

With hours left for the cyclone's landfall—leading to the cancellation of 200 trains passing through Odisha—I board the Godavari Express and head inland to deceptive safety, where a heat wave with temperatures above 45 degrees Celsius has already killed off thousands of chicken. Global warming? My survival chances seem bleak. But I tell myself I am not chicken.

Besides, this train is cute, with floral wallpaper, well-kept bathrooms and Braille signage. I am beginning to feel that Indian trains are seriously underrated by the high-flying generation. My co-passengers are an elderly couple who belong to that era when air travel was Vedic sci-fi. They are leaving town for the duration of the cyclone to stay with their son in Hyderabad. They interrogate me at length about where I am from, whether I had a love marriage, what had our parents said. The other seats are occupied by a youngish couple with matching beards and pink slippers, a young lady with her tiffin carrier, and a neat-looking man. I sense romantic telepathy between the latter two.

Before the light dies, we are in a vast plain of paddy surrounded by dark hills to the north and south. During the night, the train climbs up the Deccan plateau and a hilly chill puts me into deep sleep until we reach Secunderabad on time, at 5am, which disappoints me as I would have preferred to go on enjoying the lulling back rub of the rocking train. Then there's one of those inexplicable hour-long delays before the train terminates, a few kilometres later, at Hyderabad Deccan station.

I head to a lodge recommended by the leading guide for shoestring travel: "If all budget hotels were like the Suhail, we would all be much better off." The staff are incompetent and can't find my reservation (until I dig out a printout of their email confirmation). Then, gleefully claiming that it will get to 50 degrees Celsius by afternoon, they sell me an overpriced AC room which is grimy and mosquitoinfested, but at least the gargling AC farts icily. However, when I get back after a hot day of hogging Hyderabad delicacies around the Charminar, it turns out the lodge's power system has collapsed. I spend the night sweating in the light of my mobile.

Next day, I discover that joyriding on the elevated Metro is a great way to see the town in airconditioned comfort, and cheaply too. But when I return after sightseeing, the lodge has run out of water. I toss my well-meaning but essentially flawed guidebook into the poopy potty and check out, but the manager argues that I must pay for an extra night because he entered my arrival date wrong in the ledger.

HYDERABAD-COIMBATORE

I get back to the station, which is cleaner than much of Hyderabad itself, and when I look in the mirror (in the pay per hour AC lounge), I see Ernest Hemingway with a hangover. I need a barber as soon as I get to Tamil Nadu. Two passengers miss the Sabari Express, so there's plenty of space in my compartment. Even so, one seedy uncle snatches my berth, which I had made up nicely with my own sheets. I make a mental note to prepare my bed only at sleeping time. The others are quiet students engrossed in complex mathematical formulas.

The countryside is arid, with a rugged beauty. For lunch, there's a juicy chicken-leg biryani (₹100) which is as tasty as any I had in Hyderabad and comes with veggie gravy; for dinner, I order spicy double-egg curry with four chapatis (₹80). Throughout the day there's a constant flow of snacks and beverages such as cooling lassi (₹25). Late afternoon, we halt at Guntur, which is supposedly the home of Andhra cuisine, and I regret not having scheduled a stopover. The train doesn't budge for an hour and I calculate whether to risk jumping off to buy grub. As it rolls again, a local vendor comes on board peddling crispy bite-sized samosas (₹10 for four) accompanied by deep-fried Andhra chillies, so I do get a mouthful of Guntur. By evening, the vampire uncle vacates my berth and I quickly hit the sack before other spooks can take my spot. Much as I try to zone out, I am kept awake by manic kids who have overdosed on candy and are running around shrieking "chikki-chikkichai" in ululating falsettos. It only ends when one boy throws his father's phone out through the window in a fit of excitement. The indulgent

parent gets unhappy and a serious whacking puts an end to "chikki-chikki-chai". Two hours later, at 1.15am, I am awoken by another ruckus and the train has been invaded by bald people. I think I am dreaming sci-fi but recall there's a midnight stop at Tirupati, where pilgrims sacrifice their hair.

The ticketless travellers hold on to their berths and the situation almost comes to blows, until they realize they are all Malayalam-speakers. Then they settle the issue without bloodshed. Morning again, sun rising, landscape fertile despite this being the hottest season, farmers go about their work and we occasionally pass grand Dravidian temples. At breakfast there's a royal choice of dosa, idli-vada, upma (a semi-edible gluey preparation which I recommend to masochistic foodies) or the standard bread-omelette. After a 22-hour journey, I get off at Coimbatore, have a shave and grab a taxi to Dvara, a charming rural heritage resort in the breezy foothills of the Western Ghats. I recover in my exclusive villa's private plunge pool, staring at the towering mountain range that separates Tamil Nadu from Kerala. For two days, I eat utterly delicious Chettinad food as well as get deep-tissue massages at the spa where they reset my bones and reboot my brain.

COIMBATORE-MAHÉ

After that I am ready to join the hustle-bustle at the pleasant Coimbatore Junction for the last leg of my rail trip. The platform signage is exemplary, so even though the Mangalore Express stops only briefly, I am right where my chair car is supposed to come, its number flashing on a clear LED sign hanging from the roof. On the train, I sit with a jolly joint family of about 20 gents, ladies and children, who unpack tiffin-carriers full of veg curry and rice. The entire coach seems to be telling stories in rapid Malayalam, laughing with large white teeth like some dental miracle gene has brought them together to party.

The route curves south via the Palakkad gap, a valley through the mountain range that has been in use since ancient days, and the train gradually empties out until Kozhikode, where it fills with local commuters. Standing-room only, but I vacate my seat soon, at Mahé's quaint station, from where I walk to the first hotel down the station road. You know you are in Kerala (Mahé is technically part of Puducherry though the dominant culture is Malayali) when your bathroom kit includes complimentary pouches of coconut oil. Oiling my sun-baked hair, I am melancholic that the journey is over. It certainly was more interesting than flying.

After a Kerala-style seafood dinner, I go to the nearest tax-free to buy myself a celebratory bottle of red. I feel like somebody who has just run a marathon or, better still, meditated to heightened selfawareness combined with a slightly deeper understanding of India. It has been strenuous, for sure, but crazy fun to experience life on Indian Railways, which operates around the clock, powered by 1.3 million employees (which makes it one of the world's 10 biggest employers), ferrying tens of millions of passengers daily across a rail network of 67,000km.



My return to the railways feels like the beginning of many new adventures.

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