

A Passage Through India

or

There and Back Again (in Time for Tea)

Introduction

The writer of this journal is one Edward Plant, an American-born Englishman. This story begins on his nineteenth birthday, the 22nd March 2006, at Heathrow Airport, London. It details his travelling experiences on his gap year between his schooling at Eton College and higher education at the University of Exeter.

Pictures of the trip are hosted at <http://www.shedplant.net> and the reference numbers refer to those pictures.

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Part I

Wednesday 22 March 2006, London Heathrow

Happy Birthday me! What better way to celebrate than a trip around the World? Well, apart from this bargain of a laptop upon which I am tapping away these words, naturally. I am a bit of an enthusiast for computers, and addicted to the internet, you see, so I convinced dear mater and pater that I needed AMD Mobile technology as much as I needed clean socks.

The company arranging this expedition is Africa and Asia Venture. The idea is that we go to India, are treated to a short safari and induction week, then separate into smaller groups and head to rural villages to teach English at the schools there. There is then an opportunity to travel around the country for three weeks. After that, I have arranged on my own account to continue travelling to Australia and then to America before returning home, meeting friends and family in those two countries. While in India about twenty other students my age accompany me. For some reason, there are far more girls than boys; I suppose girls are more organised when putting together their gap years. Indeed, I have to admit my mother is largely responsible for the efficiency of my arrangements.

Thursday 23 March 2006, Delhi

When we finally arrived at our hotel, we were not in a good state: jet-lagged, exhausted, hungry and struggling to cope with the very different reality of Delhi. We were very happy, therefore, to crash out on a fairly respectable hotel bed after a lunch of cooked vegetables, rice with gravy and unleavened bread. I am sharing a room with one of the other chaps, Andy, a tall likeable fellow with red hair, who unfortunately seems to be suffering from the runs already. He is also one of those I shall be billeted with in Sanghol, my village, along with two girls, Helen and Andraea. Some of the girls in the group are (very) pretty, but it would be indiscreet to say which. Boyfriends back at home seems to be the norm.

After a nap, we ascended into an air conditioned bus for a brief tour of some touristy sites. Other writings approach the Delhi traffic³³ in greater detail, but it will suffice to say that the philosophy resemble not the rules of the road which I learned in England, but the law of a strange jungle, where only the cow has right of way.

First, a trip to a Baha'u'allah temple¹. I had not encountered the religion before,

but a plaque at the entrance proclaimed that the religion stood for every respectable thing under the sun. The gardens² of the place were extensive and well kept. The temple itself seemed to be designed in imitation of the Sydney Opera House. Inside the place was high ceilinged but unadorned, furnished only by hundreds of wooden chairs around a focal point where, presumably, a holy man would preach. The locals there were less intimidating than the hawkers and poor on the streets, and the pinks and purple highlights against the green grass was calming after the Delhi traffic.

We also visited the War Memorial, India Gate³⁻⁶, standing tall in the centre of a park where street sellers push their wares to white groups, and families play cricket on the weekend. The British High Commission was pointed out to us, as the destination in case of emergency, such as illness or loss of passport.

After a supper suspiciously similar to lunch, with the addition of mutton, many people resolved to “go out on the town”. Certain knowledge, such as a destination and our hotel's address, followed later, but even so, the evening was not well planned. We hailed an auto-rickshaw, a motored tricycle which passes for a cheaper and less safe version of a taxi. The rickshaw driver spoke not a word of English, but through a translator he understood our location and so we hopped on: I an accompaniment to three girls. The auto-rickshaw has a limited passenger capacity, so we were split into three groups with little hope of meeting up.

The restaurant we vaguely sought was in Block A of a certain district, but the rickshaw driver only deposited us, after some prompting, in Block M. We wandered up the main road. A few children tried to sell us balloons, but much of the street contained inviting bars and restaurants. We never did find this specific restaurant, though one of our splinter groups did. The night out never happened (I had difficulty containing my surprise), but the rickshaw rides through the city seemed to make up for it. The rickshaw-wallah we found to take us back, by contrast, spoke English but did not know the way. Unlike in London, where taxi drivers must train and study to learn the layout, there seems to be no standard of local knowledge (or driving!) to which the drivers must attain, and everyone on the street is prepared to help a driver who asks for directions.

Friday 24 March 2006, Agra

I failed to set my alarm clock properly this morning, and ended up missing breakfast. The whole morning and much of the afternoon was spent on the (nicely air-conditioned) bus, punctuated by a delicious vegetable samosa or three for lunch, and a chat with the waiter who told me his hobby was to collect ball point pens. He probably wanted me to give him one. The Hotel Amar that we are spending the night in is quite well furnished, despite that it is still being built. I read Hardy with my feet in the pool, while the girls bathed in sun or

water according to preference. I have had my first encounter with Indian film, though a daytime film may not be the best example. It is melodramatic featuring song and dance as well as heavy suggestive violence.

Saturday 25 March 2006, Agra and Jaipur

We have had a long day today! We left the hotel at 0545, on a bus to see the Taj Mahal. We alighted from the bus into a cool, green park which reminded me of Melbourne Zoo for some reason. At that time of the morning, there were not many people around, and very few people trying to sell. We were subjected to a not very thorough security check, as electronic devices, matches, nail scissors etc. were banned. Once cleared by the armed guard, a short perambulation brought us through the into a courtyard. We could just see the white domes over the wall, but they were hidden for a few more moments. There was a gate⁷⁻⁸ before us, dozens of feet high, with large Urdu script, a passage from the Koran, running around the outside. As you may know, the Taj Mahal is not a palace, but was erected as a mausoleum in honour of dead queen of a Mogul King. It took twenty thousand men twenty two years to complete.

The Taj Mahal⁹⁻¹¹ was framed through the gate, three large white gleaming domes, atop white marble arches and surrounded by four minarets. We had arrived just in time, so that the sun was rising in the East and throwing golden light¹⁶ on one side of the Taj. There are lush symmetrical green gardens¹⁹⁻²⁰ in front of the Taj, and normally a water stream that reflects the mausoleum, but unfortunately the water was taken away for cleaning (though there was no evidence of any cleaning). The marble of the Taj itself is inlaid with semi-precious stones²¹ that sparkle magnificently in the sunlight. Overall, the Taj itself is certainly beautiful, perhaps smaller than I imagined it. I had never before seen a picture which began to do it justice, so I fear mine will not do either. Still, we arranged for a group photo (not digital) and took our own pictures¹² along with the rest of the crowd¹¹.

I made my first purchase after the Taj: I bought a small hand-carved wooden chess set. The asking price was 800 rupees, but in the end I got it for 200 (its approximate value being 100). I found that holding the object being haggled while on a moving bus puts you at a great bargaining advantage. I made another purchase shortly after; we went to see how marble is prepared with semi-precious stones. It reminded me strongly of the Turkish carpet emporium and the Chinese jade shop that I had already been to, and I knew my parents would have relished the chance to come away with a few beauties. Still, I didn't want to make an expensive purchase on their behalf, and they would not have appreciated being awoken to be spoken to about marble. However, I purchased a marble coaster for my desk at home. It is quite pretty, and will never stain or break. I felt very pleased with my purchase until I got on the bus and realised the prices were negotiable, which soured my excitement significantly.

However, being a wealthy foreigner as I am, the difference is small.

We visited two other tourist attractions in the morning: the "Baby Taj", not a miniature replica, but in fact a precursor in a similar style but smaller scale. Again, it is a white marble mausoleum. Also we visited Agra Fort³⁴, a red sandstone building still used by the military overlooking Agra from the top of a hill and behind two walls, but it did not move me.

More worthy of notes are the streets. In England, poor to me means to live in provided accommodation with enough money to dress and eat, though not with style. Here, hundreds lounge on the streets for lack of a better place to be. Some have a street business selling food, drink or paan. Many beg. Everyone lounges seemingly purposely. You can sometimes see single rooms open to the street with the one bed occupied by a sleeping form. I presume this is the only home that person has. The buildings are truly remarkable: most made out of red brick and falling apart at the edges. On some walls, half the bricks are missing, and what is left protrude in a grid outwards. Elsewhere, the plaster or posters are peeling and faded. The telephone and electricity wiring on the poles above the streets is less tidy than my own personal computer. People draw water from wells, or if a pipe is burst, it flows across the street. A giant herd of water-buffalo wallowed in the river bed that ran through the city. That said, there is a tremendous bustle and vitality that is not seen at home. The streets are absolutely fascinating to watch, but I'm often glad to do so on the right side of the air conditioning and window.

Most of the afternoon was spent in the bus on a 200km bus ride from Agra to the city of Jaipur due west. We spent a lot of time in Agra barely moving, as a religious procession had blocked all traffic. While waiting, a few girls gave a pen to some of the street urchins that were attracted to buses. Before long, a whole crowd³⁸ of kids were clustering beneath the windows, making gestures signifying their want³⁹ for food or money but mostly writing implements. The girls found them adorable, and the two groups entertained each other for an hour or more. At length even I aroused from my slumber to take a passing interest in these little children.

Like the streets of Agra, the long bus ride held a lot of attractions. For a while I listened to music and read Hardy. I also noted another feature of Indian road rules: oncoming traffic is absolutely no disincentive not to overtake. I don't know the exact figure of Indians killed or wounded in traffic accidents every year. I bet it is a large number, though. We saw camels, stacked mounds of moulded cow-pats (for fuel), and farmers cutting corn with sickles. There were also thousands of bricks along the road marking construction sites, perhaps for granaries. Again, though, there was no sign of actual construction. The whole country seems to be in a constant state of architectural decay and rejuvenation.

The bus journey took many hours, perhaps seven or more. Most of the time was not lost to distance, but by the Hindu festival, the overtaking etiquette, and at one point, by the total disrepair of the road. After the first five hours, when I was convinced Jaipur must be within spitting distance, we stopped for

“tea and pee” at a hotel. We were all shocked to discover that there were “only” 120km to go. An extended snooze sorted out those kilometres and now I am washed and comfortable in my hotel room.

Part II

Sunday 26 March 2006, Jaipur

There were two points of particular interest today. The first was Amber Fort, once the palace of the Raj Jai Singh. It is a luxurious palace with a separate section for the three seasons: winter, summer and monsoon. For summer, shady verandas commanding a spectacular view of the whole valley, for monsoon a garden, and for winter, the walls beautifully covered in polished glass. When the candles are lit in the evening, it must make the whole room glitter. It is set atop a rocky hill, encircled by a high wall. At the bottom of the valley is a lake and Persian garden, and nearby a village.

Almost as noteworthy as the fort itself was the trip to get there. As it is at the top of a large hill, the walk is some distance. For us tourists, there are more than one hundred elephants in circulation to take two passengers at a time up the hill. We had to queue, I flat ignoring hawkers the while, but soon I was atop an elephant bound for the top! In Africa, the elephant was a creature of wild power and strength; I confess it was a let down to see Indian elephants domesticated. Still, it was fun, and I got a good picture (not digital).

Later that day, in Jaipur, a city entirely painted terracotta since the visit of Prince Albert (I believe in 1902, but I could be wrong), we were taken to a carpet emporium. The tour guide probably gets a commission for taking the bus to these places, but the tourists get to see the handmade production process and have the most charming salesmen show them exquisite items at a fraction of the price they would be at home. When my family were in Turkey, we were taken to a similar such place, and despite my insistence not to fall for the tourist trap and buy a carpet, we came out with three. This time I was more amenable to the idea and I had a few brought over to me. I prefer the Persian design, with a central diamond and floral designs around. I was faced between the choice of an orange silk (finer quality, more expensive) and red wool (lower quality, cheaper) of four by six feet. Although I could have afforded the more detailed silk, I did not want to miss the money later in my travels. So I knocked the price down just a few pounds, and became the proud owner of one striking red wool carpet! I hope to enjoy it later in the our house in Sanghol.

Monday 27 March 2006, Nawalgarh

Most of the day was spent in the bus to get here from Jaipur. I picked out some of my finest Drum and Bass tracks to listen to, and appreciated my iRiver and

noise cancelling headphones. Also, we played some fun travelling games: "Psychiatrist" and "Mafia", the rules of which I shall not bother to relate here. Though this area has been consistently dusty, the terrain has grown more desert-like here. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the only camel⁹⁻¹⁷ farm in Asia is situated not far from here. The military use camels to patrol the Pakistani border in Rajasthan, and many tradesmen here use them for agriculture and transport. Camels are thoroughly unlovely, smelly creatures on the whole, but tolerably useful in this climate. We will ride camels tomorrow.

More interesting than the camel farm was the "Rat Temple", a Hindu place of worship which is also the home of hundreds of rats. They are believed to be the reincarnated souls of the people from a certain community, and as such are fed, watered and treated with a little reverence. They shuffle around your bare feet by the dozen doing whatever it is that rats do. A few of the girls found this scary, but many thought them adorable.

Tuesday 28 March 2006, Bikaner

I had my first brief encounter with traveller's sickness today. As a result, I didn't ride the camels, or hardly leave my hotel room except to eat or buy water. I watched a lot of the West Wing, which was very good.

Wednesday 29 March 2006, Surajgarh Fort

We are staying in the most amazing luxury hotel. It is a converted fort²³, by far the tallest and largest building in the centre of Surajgarh²⁰. In fact, some work is still being done on it by workers, which makes it the second hotel we have stayed in that is still being built. I was sleeping in a king size bed²⁶, so comfortable, covered by a plush red duvet and encircled by red drapes. We could see through a latticed wall²⁷ out to the town²¹⁻²², or down on the fort courtyard from another window; a short flight of stairs led us to the very top²⁴ of the fort where we watched the sunset²⁹⁻⁵¹. We could see two games of cricket¹⁹ going on in dust clearings, and children²⁸ would wave and shout to us.

The difference between Surajgarh and most of the other large towns we have been to so far is that Surajgarh was friendly. No one tried to sell us anything. We drew crowds, yes, but out of curiosity, not greed. In the afternoon, we had the Fort's aged doorman take us out around the town. The girls were mostly interested in buying bangles. I talked to some of the locals, though with my Hindi and their rusty English not a lot was understood beyond "England", "students", "cricket" and "Namaste". Still, a dozen or so children and adults all wanted a look at the walking talking white man.

Once, rich merchants built their large houses here and in other towns in the desert. Though abandoned by their owners now and often lived in by a family, many of the wall paintings remain for us tourists to have a look at. So we did.

The fort is owned by a man named Ash, who is AV's contact in India. He is the son of the current Maharajah of Kangra in Himachal Pradesh. It was at his request that we all stayed here. I only met him briefly as we were leaving, as he arrived at the Fort late at night. In the evening, music was put on for us. The musicians³⁴ were a whole family. The father played a string instrument somewhat like a guitar, the mother sang, the adolescent son played the drums and their young (probably, though there was much debate) daughter³²⁻³³ danced. Even the three year old child contributed by urinating on the marble dancing space. The drums were played by attaching sticks to the second and fourth fingers and to tap the hand on either side of a cylindrical drum. It sounded great: you could really tap a rhythm to the drumming. The dancing was unfamiliar at first but very impressive. There was a lot of tapping and shuffling the ankles. There seemed to be a few set routines for the arms and body, but the dancing itself was improvised in accordance to the rhythm. After a few dances, drinks were served. The custom is to drink before eating at a party. Indeed, food sometimes curtails proceedings, unlike at home where social occasions often revolve around a meal. So I had a whisky (on an empty stomach, which I was not too pleased about) and sat back down.

The dancing girl then got one guest³⁵⁻³⁹ at a time up to dance with her. We didn't take the hint, so it wasn't until he pulled a whole group⁴⁰⁻⁴² up, and with the prompting of Richard, our AV supervisor, that the group as a whole⁴³⁻⁵³ started to dance. It started off a little embarrassed, but soon everyone and even I was up dancing. I fell over when I first got up to dance, though, as I had left on my leather soled slippers. I got on much better barefoot. I am more familiar with Scottish than Indian dance, though even then I am woefully amateur. Nevertheless, I actually enjoyed myself a lot!

Thursday 30 March 2006, Between Surajgarh and Delhi

The whole day has been spent travelling. We left Surajgarh at about midday on the bus for six or seven hours to Delhi. The plan was to eat at a wonderful restaurant in Delhi. Unfortunately once we had got there we had very little time to eat, tragic since this restaurant had by far the best food we had tasted so far. Perhaps this would be a good time for a note on food.

Indian food in England and India are similar, but not quite the same. In England, an "Indian curry" is a large portion of basmati or pilau (export quality) rice and a single heaping of meat (or vegetables) in a delicious hot sauce, perhaps with peshwari naan (unleavened bread with nuts) or poppadums, with a Cobra beer on the side. Here, there are a few differences: for a start, there is no such word as "curry". Meat is rarely eaten. Sometimes you will have a

chicken or mutton dish, but the quality of meat is usually not high, and unless they are properly cooked you may fall ill. The mutton can be mostly bone and fat.

Rather, a variety and wide selection of vegetables and cheeses is eaten, each in a different sauce with a different flavour. I have found that in England where curry is not indigenous, the strength of the sauce is sometimes seen as a challenge or test of virility. Here, however, where everybody has to eat it all day, I have found most to be perfectly palatable, some a little hotter than others. Perhaps the cooks were only taking pity on our foreign palates. As an example of the variety, you might have a paneer (cheese chunks) dish in a red sauce, a vegetable and green pepper dish, with white rice and rhoti, a type of unleavened bread, and spinach in a creamy cheese sauce to cool the palate. For some reason, we have always been served soup before the meal, which has varied in quality from the bland to sensuously awesome, though I understand the locals never have it. It must have been a British thing.

Another British introduction to Indian cuisine was the use of cutlery: most Indians do not use any. For formal occasions it may be used, but to impress, not as standard. Instead, you eat with the right hand only, taking a small handful of rice or bread with a sauce and bringing it to your mouth. You must never eat with the left hand, as that is the hand (traditionally, though I do not fancy it) used instead of toilet paper. For desert, ice cream is common, as is a "gulabjamun", a rice or sugar ball (I am not sure which). It is plain by itself, but covered in syrup, it tastes a bit like treacle pudding. To drink, we have always had water (sometimes beer), though fruit juice or "lassi" (a sweet yoghurt-like drink) are, I believe, common.

I liked (British) Indian food before I left, and I have enjoyed eating rice and hot food for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I admit, however, that the idea of Italian pizza, Japanese ramen, pork sausages (taboo for Muslims), or beef steak (taboo for Hindus) is a very attractive one. The attitude of one girl who did not like spicy food before she left, and is determined to eat rice for four months rather than like it now, baffles me.

So, let us return from the feast of imaginary Indian delicacies, to the memory of real ones, in this magnificent restaurant. There was the most like curry I had at home, and by that I mean very high quality and perfectly safe. We stuffed our faces with morsels as fast as we dared for fear of indigestion and reluctantly got onto a jeep to the train station.

Part III

Thursday 30 March 2006, Between Delhi and Dharamsala

Our period of touring India is over for now, and so we are going into the hills of Himachal Pradesh to prepare for our village placement. Indian trains are famous for the long distances they travel, often very uncomfortably for the hundreds of passengers. Because we had only about ten minutes until the train would pull out of the station, we ran (not easy or fast considering all our baggage) past all the 3rd Class carriages in search of our own. On our first try, we got on the wrong carriage and found an Indian family who spoke English, kind enough to point us on, but insistent that we would not take their reserved berths. We had booked berths on 2nd Class A/C, which lifted us out from the crush of 3rd Class Unreserved at a manageable expense. We each had a bunk¹, not quite long enough for my six feet and two inches. There was just enough room for us and our bags, as long as nobody wanted to move a great deal. The corridors², however, were very narrow and walking through them wearing two backpacks and carrying two more bags was difficult. I fell asleep almost as soon as we started moving, and was woken up almost before the train stopped at Pathankot. I was feeling bright and breezy the next morning, therefore, and did not have to consciously endure the slight feeling of claustrophobia on the train.

Friday 31 March 2006, Dharamsala

From Pathankot, jeeps were waiting to take us to Dharamsala. The roads are smaller and in worse condition than in Rajasthan and around Delhi. However, there was less traffic – and the scenery was amazing. We had got on the train in a crowded dusty land, a few miles away from the desert. We alighted to beautiful green valleys and rivers. We climbed up and around the hills in our jeep chatting about camping food amongst other things, admiring the scenery. We passed over a bridge and a sign welcomed us to Himachal Pradesh, the state we will be staying in for the next four months. It was comforting and many of us cannot wait to settle into their homes. Before that, however, we have a week of orientation, learning the basics of Hindi and teaching with Julia, our new AV minder.

looks out at the Himalayas⁴ on one side, and over the whole expanse of the valley⁸⁻⁹ we came through on the other. This area is aesthetically the most amazing we have been to by far. After lunch we visited Julia's home and place of work, an Institute¹⁰⁻¹² for preserving Tibetan culture and art. I was not, I confess, much moved by the craft, though it was skilled and pretty enough. There was also a temple¹³⁻¹⁴ there. Perhaps you will understand why, when I say that the discovery of the first Twinings Earl Grey teabag of the trip, to accompany nutty chocolate cake, no less, brightened me up considerably. The Tibetans I met have the same colour as the Indians, but facially look more similar to the Chinese that now occupy Tibet. The second part of the afternoon was set aside for the girls to buy cloth to make chalwa-chamises¹⁹ (sp?) (traditional Indian dresses), but I had no interest in that so am typing up the last few days' experiences instead.

Monday 3 April 2006, Dharamsala

For the last few days we have been learning Hindi parrot fashion in the Indian style of teaching, and practising our own teaching method in discussion and preparing activities and a lesson. We are departing for the villages the day after tomorrow. The prospect of settling in to teaching is an exciting one, but apparently the first two weeks are very hard.

I have met the owner of our house: he is Rakesh, the cook for Ash's family, currently staying with Ash's father, the Maharajah of Kangra, in Cloud's End Villa here in the mountains¹⁵⁻¹⁷. We had dinner there on the night of the 1st April, having walked down the mountain from the town of McLeod. We went there for an Italian lunch and shopping (I only had my shoes shined), but the town is also the current residence of the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama is old and does not admit public audiences, but I walked past his temple and home.

The make-up of my house mates has changed. One of the girls originally intended for Sanghol decided to move in with her new friends in another village, and in exchange we have two other girls.

Part IV

Wednesday 5 April 2006, Sanghol

Well, Andy, Andraea, Katie, Sasha and I have moved in to our house¹ in Sanghol and are settling in. There are two bedrooms, a lounge area and a kitchen/dining room. There are not any windows that we can see out of, but apparently this is a great asset in summer. From the outside², there is nothing to see. On entering, we thought it was a bit basic, especially compared to the houses of the other AVs. However, such ideas are relative. Our lovely, friendly neighbour Anita invited us into her house for tea. By "house" I mean room. Even the bedroom I am sharing with Andy is larger than her home. Still, I liked it: it was cosy. She has a cool dog called Zimu⁴⁹⁻⁵¹ that we all took for a walk into the fields³⁻⁴. Zimu looks a bit like a small German shepherd, is quite tame and... probably isn't rabid. From these wheat fields you can see the Himalayas on the horizon, and walking through them was very peaceful.

The AVs who have been here previously have left behind a book of tips as their legacy. There is a map, notes on teaching and some of the characters about town. The town itself is quite small, but has a few shops with English speaking keepers that stock food, vegetables and so on.

The house is just slightly more "lived in" than when we arrived this afternoon. My red carpet⁵ is in the middle of the boys' bedroom, and the map of India is on the wall. We've unpacked the food that we bought in Dharamsala (though we need to buy lentils and potatoes), our clothes and music. The other two boys bought a 5.1 5000W home theatre set for their house in Jangal for a bargain £40 (equivalent). I sat in their hotel room listening to very loud music last night. It was great, but they will be unable to use them properly without annoying their whole village. By contrast, my compact travelling speakers give a good sound, albeit without the throbbing bass-line that is needed for some of my music.

Saturday 8 April 2006, Sanghol

The night before last, the whole group from all three villages met up for a final party in Lambaghaon. Hosted by Ash, the next Maharajah of Kangra, we all met up under a canopy by the river. We drank 10 000, "Super Strong Beer" and I got most agreeably drunk. I was sitting by the fire eating my scrumptious meal of three different types of dhaal on rice, when an Indian chap pulled his chair close to mine, grasped my knee firmly and confided to me, "I prefer English men to Indian men". The beer served me well: my smile did not betray anything. Was this man coming on to me, or did he sleep through the vocabulary test between "man" and "woman"? Was he just another pervy

Indian eyeing up the European girls, or was it something more sinister? I may never be sure, because I only chatted pleasantly for a few moments until an avenue of escape opened up and I was gone.

Sasha and I also met our headmaster at the party. I was not well prepared, having sloshed down more than half a litre of India's strongest, but somehow I remained upright and introduced myself. I'm not quite sure what his name is, though, I confess. He promised to walk us to school the next day at 10:30.

At 11:00 the morning after, which I suppose was approximately punctual in a country where impatience is imported, there was a knock on the door. I threw some toilet roll and my packed lunch into a bag, and the Headmaster, Sasha, Zimu and I walked down the road to Ambikar school. The school is a single brick building, about thirty by ten by ten feet, divided into several different school rooms and a cupboard sized office for the headmaster.

In this office we sat, accompanied by the three female teachers, Sevita, Suman and Meenakshi. I was expecting the headmaster to give us a talk about the school, asking us what kind of classes and hours we wanted, introducing us to the students. We sat in silence. After ten minutes, I asked the names of the three female teachers and we chatted a little. Another silence. Half an hour after we sat down in the brick cupboard, I finally asked if we would be teaching today. Today was, it transpired, a holiday, and most of the kids were absent. We were free to leave or teach, as we wished (he was far too polite to have asked us to leave earlier). We shook the hands of some of the children that were already there, and left. Every second Saturday of each month is also a holiday, and that is this one too, so we will start teaching on Monday.

The water supply in our house comes from a tank. Soon after our arrival, however, we found that it had run out. Julia was notified and by the morning we were surprised to find once again water flowed through our house. While we slept, men had been dispatched with a truck and pump in the night and we had not even noticed. That was all very well, except that the next day, the water ran dry again. Water shortage is not something I have had to deal with in England, and fortunately I barely have here. When there is no water, you cannot cook, wash, flush the toilets, and you have a limited stockpile of drinking water that you prepared earlier. There is a well, however, in an amazing little dell. Traditionally fetching water is a woman's task, but Andy and I felt better equipped to carry the large water bucket between us. We could at least flush the toilets that had been mellowing.

Sometime yesterday afternoon Rakesh knocked on our door and breezed in to tell us that he had fixed the hole in our water tank and filled it with 1500 litres. We went up to his roof, met his mother and younger brother, and had chai. Chai is the common Indian way of having tea: a small quantity of piping hot milky tea with a lot of sugar. Sometimes you add nutmeg or ginger and call it masala tea. We talked about Rakesh's impending wedding on the 10th May. His fiancée is a Punjabi lady called Eta. The marriage, like most Indian marriages, was arranged by his mother, and I rather fancy that he has not met the girl yet. The marriage will be a large affair over four days, held here in Sanghol, and we

are all invited! At length we excused ourselves and began our supper preparations of picking weevils out of our rice. I would have appreciated the protein, but some of the girls were not keen on the idea. After our supper of rice (hopefully with low weevil content) and mixed vegetable ratatouille, Anita breezed in with chipatis and dhaal, effortlessly outclassing our meal while giving us a delicious second course. In the evening, we watched the first half of Pulp Fiction⁸⁻⁹ on this laptop.

Monday 10 April 2006, Sanghol

Water supply out again – bloody Indian plumbing. Not being able to take water for granted is actually really awful. I need to wash my body and my clothes, and the cold, undrinkable water for that comes from a bucket of well water. The water purifying tablets seem to work, but it's a lot less easy than the electric water filter. I suppose I should get used to it, and be grateful for having water at all: we are not in a drought, after all, and it's normal here to have well water. Only the rich have water out of a tap. At least we have a stable electricity supply.

Teaching today was quite hard. None of the other teachers had any intention of teaching, but were quite happy to let the kids sit in the classroom all day. You see, the new textbooks haven't arrived yet. Yeah. With nothing planned, it was quite tricky. We got them to draw, and we played Hangman. Then after lunch I took the boys to the river bank and umpired a cricket match. I haven't played cricket in six years, and I was no good then. I know enough to bluff.

Some of it was fun at the time, but at the end of this day I feel tired, unclean and slightly depressed.

Tuesday 11 April 2006, Sanghol

Today is going a lot better. It is a school holiday, so I spent all morning washing. First the plates, then myself, then my clothes. Most of my clothes are still in a hotel in Dharamsala, hopefully awaiting my return. At the moment, I only have a fraction of my clothes, and they were all dirty. In the afternoon, I was called out to play with the kids – a prospect I dreaded but one which turned out quite well. The little girls are appalling at Noughts and Crosses, often forgetting that the grid is meant to be three by three. However, I got my Indian bought chess set and played a game each with some of the teenage boys. I won both games, but one of them was close.

We have water! Dharbahadur (pronounced Dombardo), the AVs' roaming handyman, arrived in the afternoon with a tanker of water. Apparently it is normal for the tank to last only a few days. He will come every Tuesday and Friday to refill it. This is a huge relief. Sasha still thinks there is some leakage going on, but it's too early to know. We will have to supplement our water

supply with well water for some tasks, like washing up and refilling the toilet cisterns.

On a more irritating note, I may have lost my mobile telephone. I thought I packed it with me when I went to Lambaghaun. Perhaps it is still there.

Saturday 15 April 2006, Manali

Friday and Saturday are holidays this week, so all the three houses arranged to go to Manali, a town with heavy Western influence a few hundred kilometres east of here, in the mountains. The journey was eleven long hours, on windy mountain roads. Also, for the last few hours, I froze in the back. My fleece was in my bag on top and the windows were open. We were too polite or too tired to say anything. Despite the late hour, you could see a lot of the valleys and scenery by the full moon, which gave everything a silver gleam.

Our hotel, Krishna Hotel in Old Manali, was a bit of a dive, but cheap. Despite being a mountain town, the phenomenons of double glazing and central heating have not caught on and everyone was freezing at night. I had brought my sleeping bag and liner, which was a very prudent move, as the blanket provided was not enough on its own. We found a great local place to have breakfast, the Shiva Café. It served pancakes, porridge and toast with jam or peanut butter! The food in Manali I found to be of a very high standard, and we ate very well of Indian and Western food. The best dinner was had at the Dragon Restaurant in Old Manali. I had butter chicken and rice for my main, but something very special for desert.

The "Hello to the Queen" dessert is something I have to bring home. Take a large bowl and put lots of biscuit crumbs on the bottom. Add a few slices of banana, then drown it in hot chocolate sauce. On top, place two or three scoops of vanilla ice-cream. Delicious.

Apart from Old Manali, which is situated on top of a hill, New Manali lies at the bottom over the river. There is a very large market there, in which I bought great luxury items such as French raspberry jam and Kellogs Chocos breakfast cereal. I found an air conditioned internet café and browsed for a while. Also, I left a voice message on my home phone and tried to call my own mobile, which is definitely lost/stolen. Speaking of stealing, one girl Emily was mugged in Manali. She was getting out of a rickshaw, when a small Indian man in a blue jumper pushed her over and ran off with her bag. That bag contained her camera, iPod, debit cards, passport and traveller's cheques. It's awful for her, but in the end most of her things can be claimed on insurance or replaced. The passport process takes quite some time in Delhi, which is a real bother, but it's just as well it happened now, not just before her flight.

Also, Andy lost all his photos when an incompetent Indian man tried to force his memory card into a reader that wouldn't fit, despite protests. He didn't even apologise properly.

On Saturday, many of us went on a five hour trek³¹⁻⁴⁴ through a few valleys. Our destination was Sulang Ghula³⁹ (sp?), a picturesque rocky valley. A temple was situated in the snow⁴⁰ there. You cannot wear shoes at a temple, so we had to go barefoot⁴² on the snowy steps. My feet were numb by the time I reached the top.

Sunday 16 April 2006, Sanghol

On arriving home from Manali, I found a one-foot lizard⁴⁵ in my toilet. As if that was not enough, later that evening a villager was struck by lightning.

Monday 17 April 2006, Sanghol

The story goes that the twenty-five year old had climbed a tree in the thunderstorm at night with the intention of getting honey from a bees' nest. Lightning struck the tree he was clinging to: the shock caused him to fall, injuring his foot on contact with the ground. I don't know whether that's untrue, the man is stupid, suicidal or ignorant about lightning. Amazingly, he survived and is in a critical condition at Dharamsala hospital. We were alerted by cries of agony coming from elsewhere in the village. There was a downpour outside, but Andy and I donned head-torch, raincoat and trousers to discover the cause of the commotion. We followed all the other villagers that were already aroused to the house of the man. He was in a bed on the porch, a white sheet covering most of his body, groaning. We didn't want to intrude or gape at the body, so we didn't get close or see his burns, but learnt the tree-climbing story from a middle aged man and returned to bed.

Teaching school is quite fun, but draining. We were supposed to switch to the summer timetable this morning, which means an 8am start, but it sort of did not happen. The headmaster, when asked, said we would change eventually, which he later narrowed down to tomorrow.

At the moment, I am effectively the only teacher in the school. Sasha helps but has not had the courage to teach yet; at the most she plays games with the kids. The one-armed male teacher, Ravi, sits in the Headmaster's cupboard most of the day marking the children present or absence in a book. The three female teachers turn up sometimes. The headmaster's chief interest in us is to make sure we sign in and out at the beginning and end of the day. The children literally sit in a classroom with no teacher all day, unless we teach them.

and Classes 5+ (who tend to get what I am saying most of the time and are even fun sometimes). Since I got here, I have been teaching the topic of "Possession": having and possessive pronouns. Most of the kids here (with a few delightful exceptions) have a good vocabulary but are incapable of stringing sentences together. It was highly ironic, not to mention frustrating, that in a lesson on the verb "to have", the little brats were still saying "He pencil", "Me pencil". There's one little son of a bitch, only six or seven years old, that does nothing I tell him to and spent the whole lesson trying to steal one of my pencils. I nearly told him to fuck off before I remembered myself. Wouldn't understand me anyway.

Sasha and Andraea have just come back from the tailor with three absolutely ruined outfits. The fitting is terrible, too short in the arms, the hips far too wide and the trousers could fit two. They're laughing about it now.

A parcel arrived from home today: the rest of my West Wing DVDs, two books Michael gave me for my birthday, and so much great leaf tea it seems illegal.

Part V

Sunday 23 April 2006, McLeod

I'm sitting in an internet cafe in McLeod, waiting for there to be internet. I've got my laptop here and am looking forward to hooking it up and releasing the first part of this journal, only... no internet. Never mind. I got up early, and it's still only 8:25 so there's plenty of time before I go back. The reason for the early rise was that I had to sleep on a cold floor (with mattress). There just wasn't enough room at the inn and no one would believe me when I said there were other hotels in town.

(Later) That was a fun three hours on the net. I downloaded my emails to a real mail client and wrote a few of my own, I had a nice long chat with a friend on [Gaim](#) and I uploaded the first part of this journal with pictures to my [website](#). In the afternoon, I bought some toilet roll, Kellogg's Chocos, a black belt that hopefully won't fall apart and a t-shirt. Also, I remembered to collect my laundry from the hotel in Dharamsala that had kept it for two weeks. I have clean underwear now!

Monday 24 April 2006, Sanghol

I was sick at 3am this morning. It was so loud that Andraea awoke and got up to check on me. It must have been something I ate yesterday, possibly the ice cream that we are warned off. I felt much better immediately afterwards, however, and now I have a day off school.

I spent my day watching the West Wing and playing Operation Flashpoint. That was good.

Wednesday 26 April 2006, Sanghol

I took my camera in to school today. I got pictures of Ambika School², the view⁴ from the same, the Headmaster's cupboard³, Class 3 and 4⁵⁻⁹, Class 1 and 2¹⁰ and Class 5+¹¹⁻¹⁹. The kids get really excited²⁰ when they see a camera and can never have enough pictures taken of themselves.

Thursday 27 April 2006, Sanghol

Our postmen are a queer pair. They were great pals with the last AVs: they used to drink and eat together regularly at the post office. So they are keen to continue this “programme” with us. The chubby man, Choudree, speaks English very quickly in a thick accent, which makes him quite hard to understand sometimes. His partner, Ashok Sharma (Sharma, we learnt, was not his house name but his caste), is thin and quieter.

Andy and I had a “programme” together today. We had glasses of gin and 7Up with poached eggs at 3:30 in the afternoon. Unfortunately Choudree was called away at the last minute, so we got talking to Ashok. We quickly discovered his quietness is less due to shyness than a lack of confidence in his English. When we tried to speak Hindi to him, he became much more comfortable and tried to teach us a few things. Once we (had had a few drinks and) realised that there was nothing between us except a language barrier, we became far more friendly, and he told us a lot of interesting things about the caste system.

Friday 28 April 2006, Sanghol

Last night Rakesh³⁰, our landlord, arrived here, smelling of whisky. He is going to live in his house next door to us from now until a month after his wedding (which starts on the 10th of May). He is going to meet his fiancée for the second time soon. We went up to the roof next door and drank some whisky, and ate some ghee chipatis with aloo and dhaal – great. Why is it that we can't cook food as good as that?

I started [modding](#) today. That's the modder's eternal problem: you can't play the game (Baldur's Gate II²²) for more than about a day without modding it. Still, it reminded me what I love about my hobby. It was my Yikari character I worked on: I wrote some dialogue and made some changes to his unique kit. I figured that being creative on this laptop would be a welcome change to working through a limited supply of anime, manga and films.

I spoke to my mother (by telephone) for the first time since leaving the country over a month ago. It was good to hear from her, and I told her a few things I'd appreciate her to send by post.

Quotation of the day: “I cannot take seriously the criticism of someone who doesn't know how to use a semicolon.” (Attr. To Shirley Conran)

Saturday 29 April 2006, Sanghol

Today I umpired the traditional Ambika vs Kathla school cricket match²³⁻²⁸. Kathla is the school that Andy, Andraea and Katie teach at. It was quite a fun affair. Traditionally, Kathla has always been stronger. Theirs is actually a real school, with a teaching staff, a three-floor building, two computers (without

internet access) and a cool headmaster. Kathla won by ten runs.

We made a trophy from a cannibalised two litre Sprite bottle and some tape, and also presented a signed cricket ball to the man of the match.

Yesterday, I thought it would be a prudent move to back up some of my music from my iRiver onto my laptop. The thinking was sound, but I think I did not remove it properly when I had finished. The upshot is that the iRiver works fine itself, but I cannot recognise it on my laptop. So both work fine independently, but I cannot use the iRiver for backup or journal transportation purposes. Damn it. I suppose this or something worse could have happened at any time, so it's a good thing that I have about 15% of my music on this hard drive. If anything happened to my iRiver, I would hit the panic button and have another bought at my own expense and sent out immediately. Just before I left my brother took all my music onto his computer, which conveniently means home has an accessible backup with which to restock me with music.

I was pleased to receive a letter today, the first real hard copy letter I have received here. If the cricket passage in today's entry looks familiar to that thoughtful friend, let me assure him that I wrote the letter first.

Monday 1 May 2006, Sanghol

It's getting hotter. Our house is much cooler than outside, but we've started using the fans, especially at night.

I now have another two months, or sixty one days, in Sanghol. Even after that I won't be going home for another month and a half. That's a long time.

The night after Rakesh came home, he invited us all up to the roof of his house for Bagpiper whisky and a delicious chicken broth. We all got our trousers covered with grease, though. A problem I'm having here is that my clothes seem to be getting dirtier and dirtier. Tumeric stains everything.

On Thursday, we're going to Amritsar, and staying there until Sunday. Sasha and I had to turn down our Headmaster's wedding invitation, but I don't mind. Instead, I'm looking forward to changing some money, eating at restaurants and getting online. I understand there's also a temple or something?

I've heard that the two other boys from the Jangal house have run away to Goa. They went to Harrow together; neither earned the money to come here, and I understand their parents pretty much forced them to come. It's such a terrible waste of time, money, and places which could have been filled by more committed people. I also think it's tremendously cowardly. How will they justify themselves when they return home? "I couldn't hack it so I ran away," perhaps, but more likely they will try to shift the blame somehow. I have lost all respect for the pair of them.

Tuesday 2 May 2006, Sanghol

The Sanghol and Lambagaoun houses met up in Jaisinghpur today and agreed in principle on where we would be going in our three weeks travelling period after teaching. We will fly to Kerala, take the train to Goa, then Mumbai. Then I and the three girls not extending their travel in the country will leave from Delhi at about seven in the morning of the 22nd of July. Unfortunately, we'll be travelling around the country at a very bad time of year, during the monsoon season. Still, there's nothing we can do about that now.

When I counted my traveller's cheques, I discovered I had about two thirds more dollars than I thought I did. Great! I was thinking of them in terms of the British pounds I paid, not the American Dollars I received.

Saturday 6 May 2006, Amritsar

Amritsar is sweltering at the moment. I don't know exactly how hot it is, since my thermometer is broken (possibly due to overexertion), but I'd guess over forty degrees Celcius at midday and warm even at night. We got here at about one in the morning, Friday.

Amritsar is very near the border to Pakistan. Every night there is a border closing ceremony attended by hundreds of tourists³²⁻³⁵ from either side. There is a great deal of flag waving³⁶⁻³⁸ and chanting from the crowd, and an equal amount of shouting and stomping by a patrol of armed guards⁴⁰⁻⁴¹ in dress uniform complete with rather silly ice-cream wafer hat. They march⁴⁶⁻⁴⁹ up and down to cheers from their own side, then the gates⁴² are opened and two officers scowl at each other and shake hands as quickly as possible, before the flags⁵²⁻⁵⁴ are lowered and the gates closed again. It was quite an impressive spectacle. One more thing of interest was that our group was ushered into the "VIP section" of the grandstand. There was nothing special about it except that it was slightly less crowded than the others. Nevertheless, it is the first time in the trip that we have been given preference because of the colour of our skin (as opposed to the thickness of our wallets).

We've met a traveller staying in the same hotel as us. His name is Mark and he's from Lincoln, England. It was nice to meet someone new, and we passed on our experiences of the last six or so weeks. In comparison, I feel like a veteran of travelling India, even though I've seen very little of it and haven't been here long. We'll drop him off at McLeod Ganj on our way back, since it's a far nicer place to be than here.

Yesterday I had some really amazing meals in high end restaurants. For lunch, I enjoyed Kashmiri Paneer⁵⁸ (cheese chunks in an aromatic red sauce) with potato stuffed roti and a banana lassi⁵⁹ (like a shake), followed by vanilla ice cream with hot chocolate sauce. For dinner⁶⁰, Murg Tak Frontier (a smoky

boneless chicken dish in brown gravy, the restaurant's speciality), choori naan (coconut stuffed oven baked bread), a glass of beer and a "brownie sizzler": a chocolate brownie with almonds, with a scoop of ice cream balanced on top, all on a hot plate. Hot chocolate sauce is then poured over the whole lot, and sizzles on the hot plate. Each meal cost around 300Rs, or £4, which is quite extravagant here. At least while I can, I mean to eat in the way I am accustomed to, remembering my father always saying "Have whatever you like" when he takes us out. Still, the value compared to Indian food at home is amazingly good.

I uploaded Parts II and III of this journal and my pictures yesterday, and returned to the same uncomfortable internet café today, because it was the only one where I could bring my laptop.

In about half an hour, I'm going to catch a rickshaw to the Golden Temple hopefully in time for sunset. Actually, I was split up from the group this afternoon, so this is the longest I've been in a strange place on my own so far. I had no problems, of course, but I'll have to get used to it for my later travels.

The Golden Temple^{63-65,71,75,78-80,84-86,88-90}, or Darbar Sahib, and the lake Amrit Sarovar⁸¹ around it is a very beautiful and serene place, despite the hundreds of Sikh worshippers^{66,72,83} at all hours. There is a marble promenade, the Pakarma⁷⁰, around the large lake, with the shining temple in the middle, its tonne of gold reflecting off the water. There is a constant chant from inside the temple, relayed by speakers outside, from the Holy Book of the Sikhs, the Guru Granth Sahib. This happens all day from the Opening Ceremony at 0430, when the Book is carried to the Temple, until 2230, when it leaves. The entire book is chanted aloud once a day by four priests.

Everyone must remove their shoes, wash their feet and cover their head⁶³, so we availed ourselves of the shoe-collection service and the handkerchief-sellers before entering. All the way around the marble entrance are tablets commemorating the memory of generous donors, often from the military. Strangely enough, the donation amount they gave is recorded on the stone. There were pilgrims worshipping as we descended the stairs, and men bathed around the edges of the holy lake. There are also two trees⁸⁷ dating back to the Temple's construction at the very beginning of the seventeenth century, which are said to answer prayers.

After a short walk about a quarter of the way clockwise, we sat to rest our bare feet and to gaze upon the temple. An old Indian saddhu⁷⁶⁻⁷⁷, quite a dude, approached us and chatted to us about the Temple, Sikhism, astrology, ourselves, himself and so on. We took our picture with him and he jotted down his address for us to send him a copy.

Following a discourse on the future that Katie sitting next to me supposedly had in store for her, he told us that he would often meditate here, and also in the Temple itself. This seemed an awfully good idea at the time. So I attempted a meditation technique the hotel owner all the way back in Bikaner showed me. You sit cross legged, put your hands palms-up in your lap or on your knees, and connect your thumbs to the middle fingers. Then you breath in ten times

quickly through the nose, keep your eyes closed, and lose track of time. I believe that chanting "Ohm" is optional.

I should disclaim that I am an atheist, have scorned Reiki when some girls experienced it Manali, and am not a pseud Indian traveller convinced that he has "found himself" at the end of a joint. Meditation, however, which I've done a few times at school, is a state of semi-consciousness and very relaxing. I kept my body inert, overloaded the old brain with oxygen, and tried to appreciate who and where I was, in these beautiful surroundings, on the other side of the world at last. About forty minutes later judging by the clock-tower, I opened my eyes. I wasn't too surprised to find my group had moved on a little, closer to the water, and a few Indians had sat close to me.

The young man nearest to me greeted me and asked for a look at my Lonely Planet – a traveller's Bible to his great Guru (the Holy Book is considered the last Guru). I passed it to him and sat down, expecting to move on shortly. However, he spoke some English and engaged me in conversation. His name is Sunni, he is on a compulsory pilgrimage that all Sikhs must undertake at some point (or possibly at regular intervals), and he wanted to get a visa to study in Sweden. He quizzed me on what I was doing here, what I did at home and the immigration laws in England and Sweden. When I told him I had visited Sweden earlier in the year, he was very interested to know how cold it really was. I told him it could reach as low as -20 Celsius in winter. I don't know if that's entirely accurate, but I seem to recall some conversations with my Swedish friend trying to redefine my definition of "cold". Anyway, Sunni was shocked. By contrast, it was 44 degrees in Amritsar town. We also compared prices of university fees and travel. He needs 5 lakh rupees to get a Swedish visa (if I haven't misremembered and that isn't the amount for University fees), which is about £625. He seemed to think that was an achievable goal, but expensive. He had never been out of the state of Punjab. I listed some of the countries off the top of my head that I have been to, not all of which he recognised, and told him I worked for three months in IT to pay for my travels. He wants to leave the country; it's too hard to get a job in India, he told me, even with a Master of Arts degree. At length, his wife materialised in front of us and with a handshake he was gone.

In a recent email, my father advised me to "meet as many people as possible". I was not intentionally following his advice today, but I was glad that I got to talk to some friendly Indians. There were very few Westerners at the temple apart from ourselves, and we aroused a good deal of curiosity. I had my picture taken for some random family's holiday snaps, and American and Canadian expat Sikhs would introduce themselves to us. I also had one fellow talk to me about Universities in England. He seemed in awe of Oxford, and it took me a few minutes to convince him that I wasn't a student there, and that entrance is extremely hard even for English people. Once we cleared up the misunderstanding about Oxford, it was made clear to me that I went to Cambridge, and not Exeter as I mistakenly believed.

where visitors may sit in lines to receive chapatis, daal, a little pickle, and some water. You're always meant to follow Dave Matthews' advice: "Don't drink the water" but I chanced it this once and I haven't been sick yet. The food was actually quite good, and free of course, but the atmosphere of the Dining Hall was more interesting.

After dinner, we popped out to a restaurant to buy cool, cool drinking water and a shake, to return for sunset⁸⁸⁻⁹⁰ and the closing ceremony. At night, the Temple is lit up by orange spotlights like a beacon and is perhaps more spectacular than in the day.

Sunday 7 May 2006, Amritsar

I confess that most of yesterday's entry was written this evening, as I really haven't had any time to write since lunch yesterday. This happens occasionally in my journal, but I cover it up. I don't always have the time or energy to write a day's account as it happens, nor is everything written down, even some of the good bits.

The plan was to get from the hotel to the Golden Temple in time for the opening ceremony at 0430. I and the two other girls staying in the hotel didn't quite make it, but surprisingly for a man who confessed to be most like the sloth out of all animals, I wasn't far off. I was moved to a single room, which had a fan but was very hot. Between 12 and 2, I slept fitfully, boiling hot. I had made the mistake of not buying water before bed, so I actually woke up one of the staff at two in the morning to unlock the drinks fridge. He was sleeping just outside in a loincloth and didn't complain, so I felt only a little guilty. Then I had the bright idea of copying him and sleeping outside. It was far cooler outside than in my oven room, after all. There was a folded up bed just outside my room, but unfolding it quietly and successfully turned out to be a little too much for me. I had it half out, and slept outside on a bed shaped like this: /-↯

"But weren't you eaten alive?" Well, yes, I was, actually. After an hour or so of feeding the resident insect population, I returned to my room where, with the window open and fan going, it was now bearably cool. It was not long after that, however, that the two girls came to fetch me. We had arranged a wake up call but for some mysterious reason it never quite happened. The loincloth dude suffered another rude awakening only two hours after the first one that morning, and we were let out onto the street. An autorickshaw took us for half the normal rate (we didn't complain) to the Golden Temple.

and playing into the microphones. The Guru Granth Sahib (a really big book) was there. Also interesting was the thousands of rupees constantly being thrown into the reserved central floor area, where a priest would scoop them up and slide them into a box. On the first floor free religious texts were available (though not in English) and a few dozen people were sitting praying or reading. From a few windows you could also get a good view of the activity in the ground floor main room, or out onto the lake. There was a place to drink the holy lake water, and apparently I could have got onto the roof^{f92-93}, had I known. Around the temple on the island some just sat, perhaps for an hour or perhaps for a day.

The sun was rising⁹²⁻⁹³ over the walls just as I left the temple. Like the Taj, it reflects the early and late sun particularly well. I felt the Golden Temple affected me more than the Taj, though. Both were stunningly beautiful, but I felt the Golden Temple was more peaceful and alive than the great mausoleum. I think this is reflected by 332 words written on the Taj, and 1761 words on the Temple before this sentence.

Well, we spent the rest of the day in the jeep, and I'm supposed to be teaching tomorrow. Rakesh's wedding is this week, though, and I may go to McLeod this weekend coming up if I can get a bus at a reasonable price. Transport by jeep is so expensive.

Part VI

Wednesday 10 May 2006 to Friday 12 May 2006, The Wedding

On Tuesday night, we watched Terminator 1 that I bought in Manali. Afterwards, we went next door for whisky. Rather too much was pushed upon me, and I woke up this morning feeling a bit rough. Even thinking about it makes me feel a little sick. However, a hangover turned out to give over to diarrhoea. Obviously I didn't go to school, but drank a lot of water to replace the huge amount I was losing, and watched a little Bleach, an episode of the West Wing, and the film Der Untergang.

Wednesday is the beginning of Rakesh's wedding, with a Chipati night. I was really looking forward to it, but that afternoon uncertain whether I would be well enough.

The Chipati night was certainly interesting. Once the girls from both Lambagaoun and Jangal had arrived, we went to the garden next door, where colourful canopies³ and streamers² had been set up. There were already about fifty Indian guests there, mostly men, some of whom we recognised.

For a while we sat¹ in a tented area near the back of the garden. The girls drank beer, whisky or water. I didn't touch alcohol. We were to eat in the third (and last) sitting. Now, let me explain how the Indians eat at weddings (and other communal occasions, possibly). The guests sit in rows⁴, only lines of sacking between them and the dusty floor or ground. Each guest is given a steel cup for water and – get this – stitched up leaves as a plate. Wednesday night was chipati night, so men walked by with baskets distributing chipatis. Then other men would come with bowls of different vegetable and dhaal dishes of various delicious savoury tastes and give you a dollop on your leaf. You then scoop up the dishes with the chipati and enjoy. The chipatis we had last night were deliciously crispy; I think they had been cooked in ghee, something like butter. These men keep coming with more and more dishes and chipatis until you've had enough (though usually beyond that point).

There was dancing⁵⁻⁶ after dinner but I didn't feel like it. I came inside to shelter, and also to check on one girl who had come but was feeling dizzy, probably from dehydration. The others came in not long after.

Today happened to be a girl's birthday, so we sang her Happy Birthday and presented her with a card and a present of an Indian flute. When the time passed midnight, we sang Happy Birthday to Andy, whose birthday it is today.

Every AV (apart from one sick in Lambagaoun) had come to the party. However, our house is designed for five. With twenty, and Dharabahadur⁸ too, it was decidedly a squash. Everyone was tired, many were drunk, and there wasn't enough room. The birthday girl spilt some beer, and a Jangal girl smashed a glass in the boys' room. I tried to make sure that even if I shared it with others, I didn't lose my bed.

At about midnight, the taxi driver for the Lambagaoun girls strolled in to the corridor. He and Dharbahadur, for reasons that are not entirely clear, but certainly related to whisky, started exchanging harsh words. Fingers were pointed, one was pushed, and before you knew it, we had two drunk men punching each other in our corridor.

I'd like to say I stepped forward and effortlessly defused the situation, but obviously that would be lying. I did manage to dissuade Dharabahadur from socking the taxi driver in the face one last time, when Sasha had nearly managed to get him out of the door.

It took two hours to get another taxi to pick up the girls. So for two hours everyone tried to find a little space to sleep or chat. Dharabahadur was crying and being consoled in the kitchen somewhere. He had a cut on his cheek from where he was punched.

For the rest of the night, I had my bed to myself, except at one point in the morning. I had got up to go to the toilet, and when I returned a few minutes later, Helen, the girl originally scheduled to go into this house, had climbed onto my bed. She had no memory of doing so, and was quite asleep when I returned to my bed.

The band⁵ started playing again at a quarter to eight in Thursday morning. We're getting used to sleeping through anything. We stayed inside sleeping until early after noon, then arose for lunch. The wedding lunch⁹⁻¹¹ is a traditional rice meal. The leaf and sitting affair is the same, but instead of chipatis, the guests have a mound of rice. There are seven dishes, mostly dhaal, with some other kind of chickpeas and dates too, which are served in order. The Indians don't use cutlery (or toilet paper, but that's another story), so the method of eating with rice is to mix the rice with the sauce. Then scoop a mouthful with two or three fingers of the right hand, bring to your mouth, and push the morsel in with your right thumb. The left hand is not used for eating (no toilet paper, remember?). When I had the very same meal for Friday lunch, I used this method without embarrassing myself, but on Thursday I smuggled a spoon¹⁰ in from the house.

After lunch, we sat upstairs for a little. Everyone was keen to have their pictures taken: Rakesh's brother¹³ (who must in theory have a name) and his friends, the older ladies¹⁴⁻¹⁶, and most of all, the children¹². However, I don't give into the little ones' plea for "one photo", invariably followed by another photo, a photo of their friends, several more "snaps" and so on, until your patience is exhausted. They would never tire of it.

As I mentioned, Thursday was Andy's birthday. We had got him a small drum and a telescopic horn from Amritsar, a tailored shirt and some pyjama trousers, as well as a cake, from Jaisinghpur. While he was out, we decorated the house with streamers¹⁸ and balloons, and on his return, we scooped cake¹⁹.

At a wedding, it is customary for the women to be painted with henna. Henna is a dye made out of hemp, that is painted onto the hands or feet in patterns. When it dries, it stains the skin red for several days or even weeks. The bridegroom is also painted, but usually the other men aren't. We had seen

some of the lady guests²¹, especially one of Rakesh's sisters, sporting some very beautiful designs on her hand. So the girls sat down upstairs to be painted by some of the Indian women. Despite that men customarily didn't undergo this treatment, Andy and I decided that we would²²⁻²⁴.

I had in mind a full arm length tattoo like Sasuke's⁵³. That would have been cool, but a bit impractical. I did specify where and what I wanted, though. When it is painted on, it is green, but the stain it leaves when finished is red. It also made me think that I would quite like a piece of jewellery as a souvenir of India, something that I can keep on all the time to remind me. I'll see what there is in McLeod next weekend.

The program for the evening was that Rakesh and entourage would go over to the wife's village at five in the afternoon. Rakesh would stay the night and we'd come back. That wasn't how it turned out, of course.

Rakesh had hired several taxis and a bus to transport his guests to the other village, forty-five kilometres away. The jeep²⁵ that he travelled in was quite something, covered in streamers and balloons. The bridegroom himself had this amazing outfit²⁶. He was wearing a hat covered with golden tinsel and ten rupee notes, and even flashing LEDs on top. You could tell, however, that he was really nervous. The manic grin that has been a feature of our life here for the last two weeks was nowhere to be seen. His eyes flitted from place to place. He didn't talk to us or even seem to notice our presence. It is understandable, though. Marriage is a huge deal in any case. It must be especially hard to get married on your third date.

It was dark by the time we got to the home of the bride. There was a marquee³⁰, draped with fairy lights, appended to community hall next to a park. Inside the marquee was an arch³² draped with silver tinsel – this would be used for the marriage ceremonies later. At the end of the room was a dais³⁸ with two red thrones for the bride and groom.

Within seconds of alighting from the jeep, Andy and I were mobbed by the Sanghol “lads about town”³³⁻³⁵. I honestly don't know if I've ever been more popular in my whole life than on that night, with six boys about my age clustering around me, vying for my attention. They all knew my name, though embarrassingly I knew only their faces. They warmed up with all the boring set questions, graduated to cricket, before hitting the home stretch of me taking pictures of them all. Wow, was that really three mixed metaphors in one sentence? For shame.

Us eight blokes were actually hanging out in the village playground. There was some talk about going for a walk for mysterious health reasons, but it never really happened. I was a bit concerned that “going for a walk” was some kind of cover for something more sinister: smoking, drinking, rape, whatever.

The older one, Rakesh's brother or possibly cousin (who incidentally the girls think is fit, but I put this down to desperation), had brought firecrackers and fireworks³⁶. He set a whole string off at a time quite close to me, making me duck and dive for cover, much to the amusement of him and his friends. He also had a fistful of Roman candles, none of my pictures of which came out

well, unfortunately. On my home computer, I have a fantastic picture of some fire [poi](#) being spun on my tennis court with long exposure. I was aiming for the same effect, but it was a total failure. He (I don't know his name) tried to get me to light some myself, but I refused to muck about with dodgy Indian fireworks.

It still wasn't long after we arrived we were taken through for the first sitting of dinner³⁷. We were used to the rows and leaf drill by now, but my stomach tried to flee my body in protest when they gave us both rice *and* chipatis with our dhaal.

When we had had our fill, the group drifted to the seats around the dais, waiting for the bride to arrive. Rakesh replaced his headgear with a baseball cap and sat⁴⁰ in a corner with one or two friends, as well as two of our girls, for comfort, barely speaking.

We had good seats near the front of the dais, but all around more than a hundred guests were placed around, watching. Anita (Rakesh's sister) and a few of her friends were sitting in the row in front of us. Much to my surprise, one of said friends was actually quite fit. The only proof is in the bottom-right corner of the marquee picture. Most of the Indians we have seen, both men and women, have not been exceptionally attractive, so it was a pleasant surprise. I got the impression that these girls were somewhat more urban and educated than Anita herself. Maybe I was quite wrong, but their English was better. They giggled and teased Andy that one of them (whose name began with an M, though I am not sure what else) fancied him. Not the pretty girl, however. Andy started getting a bit nervous, and I assured him that he could always flee the country before they married him off. I was jealous for a few moments, but the prospect of an Indian admirer was a fearful one.

At about eleven o' clock, Rakesh plucked up the courage to come to the dais. He sat down, and had his photograph³⁹ taken. The bride didn't follow for some time. When she did arrive⁴², however, it was in a beautiful red dress, henna and jewellery, accompanied by full entourage⁴¹ of her family. Strangely enough, when the couple were sitting together under the "Ekta [Pierced Heart] Rakesh" sign, it was less of a marriage ceremony than a photo-shoot. There were official wedding photographers with a shoulder-head camera, as well as one for stills. They got in the way of us amateur photographers, but their mounted light was useful for avoiding flash. Both the bride and groom looked really nervous. Rather than the smiling you might see in a Western wedding, Rakesh looked solemn and scared, and Ekta was weepy. She does have to leave her family for the first time, for a man she hardly knows. It's common to have crying brides, I hear.

After a fair few pictures⁴³⁻⁴⁷, Rakesh placed a large furry garland around Ekta's neck. She tried to reciprocate, but was so small that she couldn't reach over Rakesh's head-dress. After two or three fumbled⁴⁸ attempts and the beginning of embarrassed titters from the crowd, her father dashed onto the dais and lifted her up bodily to such a height so she could drop the garland over her husband.

Soon after that, the girls left. Rakesh insisted that they all go, considering the number of drunk pervy Indian men would rise as night went on. It was quite sweet of him to look after them, but it did mean they missed the ceremonies – and the night. Anil Bang, who is our taxi driver most of the time, and a whole untold story in himself, piled all the girls into his jeep and off they went. I suggested that I could get on the roof with Andy so we could all get home. “Not at night,” he joked. The time was about midnight.

Andy and I were left behind at the wedding on our own, with transport promised to return in five hours. I sent my camera and wallet home with the girls, so I have no pictures of the long night. This is when it started getting a bit crazy, but that night was one of the most memorable Indian moments.

The first thing we did to stave off sleep was order a cup of chai. It was much different from the evil concoction that I was given when I first arrived. I swear I don't know if that was supposed to be tea or coffee. Then we had a second dinner – why not? We sat down again with Dharabahadur and a few others and had the same food given to us, cold. Andy and I laughed at the prospect lying before us. Would we have a third dinner later?

There was a man chatting to me over my shoulder while I ate. His name was Smit, and he knew Rakesh from being the visiting electrician at Cloud's End Villa, where Rakesh works. His English was a bit patchy, and he kept saying “Thanks, thanks” or “Sorry, sorry” for every pause searching for a word. Anyway, he chatted to me in his mild mannered fashion about how the salad I had been leaving was “good for health” whereas the far tastier dishes were not so much. I wasn't really interested in speaking to him at that stage, but he wouldn't leave me alone.

As we were washing our hands, another electrician (who worked for LG) introduced himself to us and handed over his business card. He told us that we were honoured guests, something well out of the ordinary for most of the others here. He also invited us to call or email him at any time, but as is often the case, we interpreted it as a gesture of goodwill rather than a serious request.

Kind of stuck for any better activity, Andy, I, and Smit in tow, returned to the covered area to sit next to the arch and wait for the wedding ceremony to continue. The square stone altar was covered with white powder in diamond patterns. We wasted a good few minutes trying to work out what it was; eventually someone told us it was flour. We also tried communicating with Dharabahadur, but that's a difficult task if ever there was one. He drinks whisky, and had had a few by that point. It was late and he was tired. His English is passable but not fluent. He never wants to contradict anything you say. So at what stage of the conversation is your point lost? When we were quite satisfied that we wouldn't get more than nods and shrugs out of him in answer to any given question, we left him to sleep.

Another cup of chai was brought out to us as we were sitting. While we were sipping the life giving brew, two or three white clad priests came and sat around the arch. They began to chant softly in Sanskrit and lit a little fire on the

altar. I explained (or tried) to Smit how in Europe, Latin was a language with similar cultural significance to Sanskrit in India. He tried to give us a commentary on what we were seeing, but either his knowledge or English didn't progress far beyond explaining that we were seeing traditional marriage rituals. He did tell us, however, that Andy and I were attracting more attention than the marriage itself. Marriages occur infrequently, but foreigners in this area are very rarely seen. Most people around here, and especially the children, have lived their whole lives in such a tiny part of one state in a huge country, with very little interest or contact with the world beyond India's borders. I think it quite sad; by contrast, I have had the opportunities to visit one in ten of all the states in the world (I counted). They don't know any different. Anyway, that's why a foreigner is such a freak here, in a way that isn't quite the case at home.

Rakesh had changed into a smart new khaki suit for the next part of the marriage, though he kept the headdress. He sat on a different side of the square to the priests and they seemed to lead him through some "Indian marriage rituals". Ekta sat down too and she did something with pots of water. I think it was meant to be symbolic, but I don't really know what they were doing. There was nothing spectacular about this part of the ceremony, though I considered myself lucky to be one of only two AVs to see it. It's ladies first, apparently, so she finished her part and then left Rakesh to do his.

Andy on my left was being talked to by some young men. I think that though some of them were from the brides' village, a few were Punjabi, and I got the impression that some of them were stoned. Smit was telling me how rude and demanding they were on account of these two factors. They wouldn't be the first rude and demanding Indians we had met, not by far.

The self-appointed spokesmen (because he spoke good English) approached us both and requested that we dance with him and his friends outside. The band, who had travelled here on the hired bus, were still playing out at the front. Neither of us really wanted to, and we told him so, but he insisted that we come to dance for as much or as little as we wanted, as a special request, and he really appreciated it. With mixed feelings of reluctance and trepidation, we left our seats and ventured out into the cacophony of the night.

The band was stranding under a tree playing just as loud at three in the morning as they had been at five the previous afternoon. Around ten young men (no girls) were dancing in the road. They cheered when we appeared and beckoned for us to join them.

So we danced. At first, we were fairly unenthusiastic, and Indian music and dancing are both a bit alien. So I stuck to what I knew: one of my best friends at school would always skank around the house. Just by that I have as much experience of skanking as any other dancing style. "Skanking" is a dance style associated with Ska music (probably better defined on Wikipedia than I could ever attempt), involving the kicking of the feet and twisting of the body. Andy also knew how to skank (as well as me, anyway). We skanked together to great acclaim from our audience – the Great Britain Skanking Double Act! I also did a

little bit of basic Scottish reeling (mostly setting, since Andy hadn't ever done it). We laughed at the surreality of it all. There we were, the only white men for a hundred thousand metres, in a remote part of India, thirteen million metres from home at least, skanking at half past three in the morning.

That dancing experience made me want to take that same friend up on his invitations to rave with him. It's something I'd like to do when I get home. I'm not entirely sure where in the world he is right now, though I suspect he's finished his tour of South America and is working in London.

The dancing showed us how unfit we were, and after only quarter of an hour, we wanted to sit down and rest. The young man who had brought us over sat down with us and introduced himself. He worked in a call centre, which I found quite interesting. At my work at Se7en Marketing in Marlow, I would quite often get calls from Indians wanting to sell me phones from a particular brand, and after a few times, I found it irritating and left them hanging on the line. This guy, however, gave a face to the increasing number of Indian call centres. He told us about the accent training (which left him with an unusually Anglo-Indian accent and very good English), his quota of only five sales a week (from over a hundred calls a day), and how the English people he called were so much more polite than when he had to call Americans. However, when he called America it was to remind customers about late payments, which makes the annoyance of the American clients understandable. He also had questions for us about English marriage traditions, which take place over only half a day. He was flatteringly surprised that both Andy nor I were unmarried and single. He himself was married only the week before.

As we were idling away the night with conversation, a jeep roared up the road, and screeched a full ninety degrees to a halt on the grassy verge opposite us. A very tired looking Anil Bang climbed out wearing grey taxi driver's uniform and an absurd Himachali hat. "That's our ride," we said.

Anil had made good time, taking an hour less than estimated to drive to Lambagaon and back. He drives fast anyway, but with no passengers and little traffic, he had been speeding up and down the hills at about ninety kilometres per hour. He left the jeep and we walked him inside, where we all had a third cup of chai.

Our chai drunk, we moseyed back to our ride, little expecting to find fifteen Indians already crammed inside waiting for a driver. Since there had been no mention of others sharing our taxi (not that I minded that, in principle) and that the jeep seats six comfortably, we were a bit surprised. Anil chucked out two people out of the front seats (again, not literally) so we could wedge ourselves in with a wheezing child on the front seat.

Anil had never let us white people have more than about ten in a jeep at a time, so we assumed that fifteen must have been a personal record. He seemed torn between insulted and amused. Only fifteen? No, twenty-two was his personal best! With passengers hanging on to the sides and on the roof, he achieved that number. It was then I realised that when he said I couldn't travel on the roof at night... he wasn't joking.

I don't know Hindi, but I understood very clearly that Anil was gossiping about our group with the other passengers, literally behind our backs. "Babble babble... Sasha... smoking... babble" kind of gave the game away. You see, girls aren't supposed to smoke in this country: it's an open secret that some of our number indulge in this earth-shattering scandal.

I couldn't stop myself from snoozing on the journey home, but I did notice that it was getting lighter. Day was breaking on Friday morning, and I had partied through the night.

Part VII

Saturday 13 May 2006, McLeod

I slept through all Friday and so missed the final marriage ceremony of walking around the tree. Today, we took the common bus to McLeod¹⁻³, which took five hours but only cost sixty seven rupees (about seventy eight pence).

We had a tough time finding a guest house because of a full moon party. In the end, however, we managed to find room in one that was a bit out of the way, but perfectly good. We had a good Indian meal in the Ashoka restaurant and headed off to McLo's, pretty much the only bar in McLeod. I hadn't even ordered myself a beer before two Old Etonians from my Block, Ridian Emelyn-Williams and Henry Mostyn, sauntered up the steps onto the drinks terrace. Evidently there's no fashionable place to go, from Kensington to McLeod Ganj, where Etonians cannot be found. Also there was a friend of my cousin from Charterhouse that I had met once. It turned out that they too had been teaching, but in one of the richest boarding schools in India, where they had such facilities as electricity, computers, furnished classrooms, grounds and guarded walls. They hadn't been called upon to do a lot of teaching per week, either. They only had a few days to travel and had just come from Manali.

Beer was drunk, hymns were sung, and even a joint was passed around. 'Twas a merry party. We agreed to meet up for Sunday lunch.

Sunday 14 May 2006, McLeod

I uploaded the fourth part of my journal today, but the Indian morning is too early for my friends to be awake, so my time on the internet was not so fun. I wonder how different Sanghol would be if I had constant broadband access. Probably not so different to home, and I don't think that's the point of me coming. I am certainly glad that I bought and brought this laptop, though.

My two friends, the Jangal public school girls, the Charterhouse boys and I all arrived at half past one at Nick's Italian restaurant, which commands the best view of the valley in McLeod. The view makes up for its average food and miniature pizzas. Fortunately for me, both of my OE friends ordered banoffee pies which they hardly touched, so I scoffed them for free.

While in McLeod I bought a beautiful chess set⁴. Next time I get the chance, I'll need to start buying presents for others, since there are some wonderful Indian and Tibetan craft shops in McLeod.

Monday 15 May 2006, Sanghol

After the wedding, we had a huge amount of rubbish. I haven't mentioned it before, but the way we dispose of rubbish here is to burn it. So we made a big pile and doused it in more kerosene than normal.

It burned well. So well, in fact, that it began to burn the leaves and trees around it, and spread a little way around the garden and into an adjoining field. Soon the three girls were rushing for pots of water, Rakesh's younger brother was throwing dirt on the flames, and I was stamping it out.

Thursday 18 May 2006, Sanghol

We watched Brokeback Mountain, which was one of Andy's birthday presents, last night, on the girls' specific request for watching "Jakey-babe" and the other one do aggressive cowboy sex.

Sasha and I didn't teach this morning. The father of our one-armed deputy head master Ravi died last week; he and his family were still in mourning. We hadn't been sitting in the cupboard long, when Vinod, the Head Man of few words, invited us to accompany him to Ravi's house. Ravi lived just a few metres up the hill, and as we approached, I could hear what sounded like a baby crying. When I removed my shoes and entered, I was that there was no baby but an old woman wailing without restraint. Her face was completely veiled and she was rocking and gasping for air in between cries. There were about seven others in the room, mostly women. Ravi was sitting on his own at one end with a shaved head and stubble on his chin. I never knew Ravi's father and I hardly know Ravi, but being there made me glad that all my family are still alive and well.

After lunch we taught the kids at school how to say Sasha's name correctly. They had been pronouncing it "Sassa" or "Shasha" all this time. Obviously in Hindi there is no difference between "S" and "Sh", and indeed many of the children's "S" sounds are slurred.

I idly wrote down "She sells seashells on the sea shore", and when almost no one could say it properly, I spent about an hour teaching them in turn how to enunciate "S" correctly. Some picked it up quickly, our brightest student (and another teacher) got it right first time, but one were still shouting out "Shu shall shushull on the shushor". For those who could master this tricky lesson in English, I set them onto "How many wood-chucks would a wood-chuck chuck if a wood-chuck could chuck wood?".

I also blitzed my chitin.key last night mucking around with movies.bif. Award yourself a star if you understood that sentence.

Sunday 21 May 2006, Sanghol

I'm pretty sure now that my iRiver has physical errors on it which are preventing it from being recognised by my laptop. That, or the cable's broken. Since it still works as a music player, I guess I'm lucky. I wouldn't be able to have one sent out to me, even if I wanted to, as I'm sure it wouldn't arrive. I've found that most letters and parcels are opened before they get to me. I will have to buy a new one when I get home in the winter. iRivers are great as long as you don't drop them.

Also, we had our half-term party last night. It was unremarkable in itself except that now I am half way through my time in India and my teaching. I have one month and ten days until I leave Sanghol and fly to Cochin, Kerala to begin further travels.

Omg – I just discovered that somehow by total accident I managed to achieve what I was trying to on Thursday night. My Baldur's Gate II now starts up (properly – looks like the chitin.key could be salvaged) without the intro movies! This is great! Now if I can only work out what needs to be done to reproduce it...

Tuesday 23 May 2006, Sanghol

Rakesh took us and the Lambagaoun girls for a walk⁵⁻⁸ on Sunday. The location was advertised as a "waterfall", but it was more truthfully a riverbed with free flowing water pipes. Still, it was a nice place, and I had a refreshing shower. Rather than chat with the girls⁹, I sat on some steps up the hill with Zimu¹⁰⁻¹¹, and thought for the first time about my life after University. I thought it might be nice to carry on living in Burnham with my brother and a dog, if my parents do decide to retire to Bosham. Usually it's the children, not the parents, that move away from home. Still, why jump to the bottom of the crowded property ladder when you are already standing three rungs up? Or perhaps it's too big a place for two young bachelors.

School has been a chore for the last few days. I'm more likely to find myself reading Ulysses in the cupboard or keeping the peace in the classroom than teaching. I know that it's partly my fault that I'm finding it boring. If I came in on time every morning with a lesson plan and a smile, I suspect that things would come easier from that point. When I get home, though, I don't want to think about school.

I spent most of yesterday afternoon creating a single HLA (High Level Ability spell) for Yikari, and today I plan to mod some more. My lifestyle and character hasn't changed (much, yet), just my location. Meh, put the kettle on and pass the biscuits.

Friday 26 May 2006, Sanghol

Yesterday, my cheap travelling watch stopped. I'm not at all used to not knowing the time. I also finished Operation Flashpoint yesterday. A good game, but now finished it limits my supply to four games, only one of which I have not before finished. It should last until I leave Sanghol, and I'm trying to ration my digital entertainment, finding time for other ways to pass the time. For example, I am in the penultimate chapter of Ulysses and hope to finish it by the end of the month. Also, I sewed on a trouser button this afternoon – the first use of my sewing kit.

I think it shows in this writing that I'm bored. I'm looking forward to leaving Sanghol; to embarking on more exciting travels around the wide world; to eating meat twice (or three times) a day and drinking ale or real Scotch; to seeing my friends and family in Australia and America; to meeting my parents in Boston, my birthplace; to home in about three months' time. But now I'll settle for the end of May and a decreasing count of thirty days of June in Sanghol Village, Kangra District, Himachal Pradesh State, India.

I just spent all afternoon successfully making a WeiDU mod that disables the intro movies. Now I've found out that all movies can be disabled in the pre-existing game options, so my afternoon's labour was completely pointless. At least it was fun and time consuming. Tip for the wise is “Disable Movies=1”.

Sunday 28 May 2006, McLeod

Fuck. I'm all alone in McLeod Ganj, I'm sick and I feel awful. I haven't managed to contact Julia or my house mates to tell them I won't be coming back this afternoon, though I have tried.

Last night, I had trouble sleeping with fever, then in the early hours I woke up to diarrhoea, nausea and a skull-splitting headache. While the morning crept by, I slept and drank in pain. At lunchtime, I tottered around McLeod looking for a pharmacist. My vision was bleached white, just like the pallor of my skin.

Fortunately, I did find help. A friendly English-speaking doctor took one look at me and guessed my symptoms, sold me some drugs, gave me dietary advice and led me to a nearby Indian café. He ordered some plain yellow dhaal for me and emptied a hydration packet into a bottle of water. My lunch looked like yellow slop when it arrived, and I had no appetite, but I ate a little anyway.

I slept through the afternoon, and that combined with the drugs meant that by the evening my headache had lessened. I felt well enough to watch the second half of xXx in Hindi before bed.

Monday 29 May 2006, McLeod

I feel a lot improved over yesterday. I still don't have much of an appetite, and I'm not over it yet, but I haven't had diarrhoea yet today, the headache is all but gone, and standing doesn't seem quite the feat of endurance it did this time yesterday. I've been shopping this morning for gifts, which was quite fruitful. One or two of the items I purchased would fetch more in England alone than the cost of everything I bought here.

I'm quite sure that my sickness was caused by the chicken I had last night. Though for nineteen years, meat has been a staple of my diet as much as rice is here, I should probably stop eating it now. We're in summer now (with the possibility of an early monsoon) and meat is now even more unsafe. Not much of a treat if it costs twice as much as a vegetable dish and puts you in bed for a day.

I'm a bit worried that my house mates may doubt that my extended stay here is due to sickness. If Katie is able to listen to her voicemail, she should be able to hear the death in my voice. Otherwise, the first they will see of me, I will be healthy laden with shopping. They know that – if Rakesh was not hosting a farewell dinner on Sunday night, and Andraea's birthday party tonight – I would very much like to stay in McLeod another day or two. This is still true and, now that I feel almost well again, I'm glad to have a short break.

Wednesday 31 May 2006, Sanghol

I got back to Sanghol safely, but before I even have time to unpack, we're all going to Shimla, state capital and colonial hill station! Discounting tomorrow (teaching as per usual), this whole week will be a holiday for me! Katie got my message, and my mother sent Andraea a text message also, letting her know that I was on my way. It turns out that Katie was sick at the same time with the same symptoms as me, so it must have been the samosa from Jaisinghpur we both had, not the chicken korma. I might now consider returning to the restaurant that I believed had poisoned me.

On Tuesday, my last full day in McLeod, I did some more shopping on behalf of some friends, who will refund me the price. I saw the Dalai Lama's Temple in the afternoon (not spectacular in itself, though I would like to see the Dalai Lama if I have the chance). I had dinner with Farooq, the merchant who I had given so much business to, in the back of his shop. We talked, and watched Mr. Bean on the television.

I found out that my brother¹² has won gold at National Schools' Rowing Regatta! I'm very proud of him, as well as the rest of the 2nd VIII¹³⁻¹⁴, and the many other Eton crews that also won gold this year. A fantastic year for Eton College Boat Club. I won a gold at NSR three years ago for the Eton Colts B

crew: the elation I felt at that moment hasn't been equalled by anything since, and I think you can see the same pleasure in my brother's grin.

I've finished Ulysses and finished May. The first few days of June are swallowed by a holiday, then it's three full weeks and the last five days in Sanghol. Bring it on.

Part VIII

Sunday 4 June 2006, Shimla

Shimla, currently capital of Himachal Pradesh, was once where the British Viceroy retired in the summer to rule the whole colony. Shimla is located amongst some very high hills, and the town clings¹⁻⁴ to a very steep hillside, making walking around an exercising activity. The town retains the British influence in its architecture: the narrow gauge railway, town hall⁵, theatre, church⁶⁻⁷, Viceregal lodge (now a centre for higher study), were all built by the British in their own style. This gives the town a colonial feel – almost like home. Even the weather is cool and dreary.

On our first afternoon, we visited the Museum and then the Viceregal Lodge. The museum was not very interesting, but the Viceregal Lodge was a very strange thing to see in India. It is a stately home⁸⁻¹⁰ in the Victorian style with flower gardens¹¹⁻¹²; it looks like a National Trust building. It was actually quite a shock that the café was a tiny greasy Indian affair and did not stock great cakes like Overbecks in Devon. I was quite annoyed that both the Museum and Lodge openly charged foreigners five times the price of Indians. Perhaps the seat of British imperialism wasn't the best place to argue the principle of fairness and equality, though.

Even aside from the White Man's Tax, Shimla was a very expensive place to be. Without a television, en suite bathroom or air conditioning, a double room in the Shimla YMCA was twice the price of a similar one in McLeod, though breakfast was included. The tea was revolting. We also found that restaurant prices were quite inflated. On the other hand, you could get a good variety of Western conveniences and amenities. I have already mentioned that we stayed in the YMCA. There was also a Ritz Cinema, a Barista's coffee shop, a Domino's Pizza, a Buskin & Robins ice cream parlour, and real Scotch whisky.

Last night, we went out to celebrate another birthday. In the main square outside the church and our hotel, the Shimla Summer festival was being held: a big concert with loud (recorded) music and dancing. We watched that for a while, while the birthday girl bought popcorn, then we went to the ice cream parlour. I became the proud owner of what is called a Banana Royale (thoroughly unlike a Cheese Royale), but I like to think of it as a little piece of aweswom [sic]. Once everyone had finished experiencing their ice cream, we walked back up the hill to the bar.

When I stayed in London earlier in my gap year, I became accustomed to having a gin and tonic or fine Scotch whisky on the rocks every night. It was always a treat, but it was nevertheless regular and normal. Here, I drink whisky, but I miss Scotch. Now, in Shimla, there was a bar, and in in this bar they served whisky. I double checked: the Scotch really was brewed, blended and distilled in Scotland, UK. It wasn't Laphroig, but it was the real deal. It was as expensive as home, that's how dear it was.

I bought¹³ a glass. I looked¹⁴ at the whisky, I smelt the whisky, and finally, I drank the whisky.

I swear the picture¹⁵ makes me look a lot more drunk than I really was.

When we presented our birthday card and gift, our whole house received a hug in turn. Unfortunately, with the way sexuality is suppressed over here, hugging a member of the opposite sex is not just a hug, but a part of sex. When I received my hug, all the tables of exclusively Indian men in the bar cheered. My thoughts must have been exactly opposite to what they were thinking.

There was a discothequé attached to the bar. The girls piled in, as did the barful of pervy Indian men, but I shared a very disappointing stale water called Kingfisher Beer with Andy. We could hear from outside that the Disc Jockey was appalling. He obviously only had one CD of Western music for the girls, and would keep switching tracks after fifteen seconds, sometimes returning to the one he started with. Then when he ran out of music, he played the same songs from the beginning. Though familiar, the songs were pretty bad anyway.

On Sunday morning, we began the ascent to Jakhu Temple, dedicated to the monkey god Hanuman. The temple is at the top of a mountain, with an absurdly steep path leading up to it. Katie¹⁸ and Rachel¹⁹ hired horses and went up the longer but flatter road. Andy and I powered on ahead, and reached the summit in twenty minutes, arriving before the two ladies on horseback.

Just as the rat temple we found rats, so at the monkey temple, it was no surprise to find many monkeys. They are, in fact, quite a pest. Sticks were being sold on the long walk up to threaten or beat them with. We saw one poor man whose glasses²⁰ had been stolen by a monkey. The baby monkeys were quite cute, but had nothing on the awesome kawaii power of wallabies. I saw two playing²¹, and one drinking²² from a water tap. There was also a hunchbacked²⁶ monkey that came quite close to us.

The views from the top were billed as breathtaking and panoramic. They were good²³⁻²⁵, but obscured by the trees all around the temple. The temple itself was quite small and tacky inside, though some of the many pictures of Hanuman were interesting.

After a pizza for lunch, I had a look inside the Gaiety Theatre. The theatre is currently closed for badly needed renovation, but I was let in and allowed to take pictures²⁸⁻²⁹.

Tuesday 6 June 2006, Sanghol

In the last few days, Andraea's camera, and now her iPod, have broken. Understandably she is very upset right now. I have lost two mobile telephones and my sunglasses have broken, but if I were to lose or break my camera, iRiver or laptop, I can't even imagine how pissed off I would be.

We're going to Manali over Thursday night with Kathla school. I'm looking

forward to getting away, but being in a bus with a lot of kids for hours will probably be awful. I intend to hide in a corner with headphones. I'm still looking forward to leaving this village and travelling. The Jangal girls are abandoning their posts and leaving this week. I wouldn't want to do that but I just wish there was less time left until we leave.

Thursday 8 June 2006, Sanghol

Great! A four day trip to Manali. Our private bus is leaving at ten thirty this morning, should be in Manali this evening in time for dinner at the Dragon restaurant, and we'll get two full days in Manali before heading back on Sunday.

Friday 9 June 2006, Manali

Begging belief. A four day bus journey?! The bus rolled out of Kathla school at eleven forty yesterday morning and drove all day. But I should explain – this was a school trip organised by Paravesh, the headmaster of the other school just outside Sanghol. There were fourteen AVs, five teachers and about twenty kids in and on top of the bus. We were headed for Manali, or more accurately, for the Rohtang Pass nearby.

The bus stopped once every hour for various reasons – water, toilet, photographs, snacks, lunch, leg-stretching and so on. I had my iRiver for most of the journey, which kept me happy and hassle-free from the kids occupying most of the bus.

Most of the AVs chose to ride on top of the bus^{35-37,39} for most of the journey. There were rows of metal bars which weren't very comfortable, and the sun was beating down so that they all burnt horribly. Nevertheless riding up top gave you a sense of freedom, and it was a lot quieter than inside, free from the sounds of the engine and children.

When the sun had retreated and dusk was drawing in, I climbed up myself³⁸. It was certainly not comfortable, especially since I had to share the back with the second driver and conductor who scrambled up after me. The second driver was another strange Indian man with different cultural ideas of males touching and personal space. At first he asked if I liked Indian girls and asked all the usual questions, but later he put his arm onto my stomach from behind me and asked if we were both sharing a hotel. Urgh.

After almost two hundred kilometres had been covered in about eight hours, and Manali was close, we turned off and took an eighty kilometre detour. We could have been in Manali on Thursday night without any trouble, but there was a temple and free accommodation in this random town⁴⁰⁻⁴¹. Today I found

out that we stayed there because Paravesh had booked nowhere for us all to stay in Manali. He specifically told us that we would be staying at the Institute of Mountaineering, but... I don't know what happened to that "plan".

At the temple, we were all put into a large room and left to reserve our own patch of floor and lay out a sleeping bag. This I did post-haste, keen not to lose out on whatever little I had. I was glad that indeed I had brought my bag (though I foolishly assumed that *surely* it wouldn't be necessary to bring a pillow).

Dinner was also free, but sorely disappointing. We were given three dishes on our thali, all too watery. The spinach tasted like mud, the potato and bean dish was just about ok, and the sour one was no better. This was far superior, however, than this morning's breakfast.

There was only a limited amount of time available for breakfast, before we boarded the bus to spend the morning retracing our path. However, we had over an hour and I didn't anticipate any trouble. Since I was the hungriest and (while hungry) least tolerant of hanging around in our group, I strode off to locate a restaurant for breakfast. I found two adjacent prospects, and inspected the menus of each. One had a much better breakfast menu, so I led the group of fourteen into the restaurant.

The first sign that all was not well was that the staff made no attempt to set up a third table to fit us all, nor did they help when we did it ourselves. I surveyed the menu with greedy anticipation and decided on Fruit and Nuts Muesli with Yoghurt, as well as jam toast and a cup of tea. When the waiter took our order, he didn't hear my Muesli order. I didn't take this badly, as there is often a language, accent or pronunciation barrier. I pointed out on the menu exactly what it was I wanted, and he pointed to it himself to confirm. The strange thing was that he (deliberately?) did not write it down.

We talked and waited for our breakfast. After twenty minutes we began to wonder where it was, and after forty we were thoroughly fed up of waiting for it. Katie went to the kitchen to ask where our food was, and it was at this point, I believe, that they started making it.

About three quarters of an hour after placing our order, the first cups of tea started to arrive. A tiny dish of porridge appeared for one girl. A glass of a brown liquid was placed on the table, but no one could tell whether it was tea, coffee or hot chocolate. What on paper had promised to be an sugar and lemon pancake turned out in reality to be a small, cold, rubbery object with no additives, for example sugar, or, to pick a juice completely at random, lemon. A plate of scrambled eggs transformed into an boiled egg cut into slices. When my toast was placed in front of me, I thought it must belong to someone else, as I hadn't ordered a cold plain bread sandwich. Dissection of the object revealed a thin coat of reddish liquid masquerading as jam. My muesli never arrived and a portion of cornflakes arrived in a tall glass. This was our food and we were meant to be boarding the bus in twenty minutes.

This just wouldn't do. I have eaten at hundreds of restaurants in twenty countries, but I can't recall any with worse service, food or with such a

misleading menu. Someone offered us a discount, but any price greater than zero was too much. I stood up and with most of the party left the Worst Restaurant in India an hour poorer, and took just a few steps next door. Within two minutes I had piles of butter toast and tea to go.

We drove until four today. When we arrived in Manali at last, it transpired that we hadn't booked the Mountaineering Institute, we couldn't stay there and would therefore have to find a hotel at our own expense. If I had known that the all-inclusive price included no place to sleep and consisted entirely of sitting on a bus, I probably wouldn't have come.

Nevertheless, I found a really nice hotel, and ate a good dinner at the Dragon Restaurant. And yes, I had the Hello the Queen.

The Football World Cup began today, and I saw some of the Germany-Costa Rica game. Both teams must have been very nervous to let three goals in combined in so short a time.

Saturday 10 June 2006, Manali

Screw the Rohtang Pass⁴²⁻⁴⁸. No way I'm getting up at five to walk down to New Manali and catch the bus. If I get in that damn thing, I won't get out for another two days, and then teach the next day. I would have liked to eat breakfast at the Shiva café, but it's not open, so I'm sitting here with a cup of chai at the Dragon again, tapping away merrily. Incidentally, I've found that chai without sugar is revolting and not to be attempted. I had a sip before he brought out the sugar pot to me.

After breakfast, I walked down to New Manali. The best shopping in Manali is for Kullu Shawls, but I'm not interested. Instead, I bought a pirated copy of Warcraft I, II and III, and some emulated (I think) NES games. I had some Japanese food for lunch and found an internet café with a very fast connection to spend my time relaxedly until the others were scheduled to come back from the Pass.

We heard from them, and plans changed once again. For the better, though: instead of driving to Kullu tonight, we were going to stay in Manali one more night. Therefore, we had to go up to Old Manali to find a hotel. I puffed on some chillun in the lounge of the hotel we stayed at the night before in front of the England game. They hadn't any room, though, but one guy led me to his guest house. It was lovely and had fantastic views. It was too far away from town, though: you had to walk through some random village for ten minutes to get there.

I was pleased that England won their match, though it wasn't very good to watch (and I hear that Paraguay suffered an own goal). The Sweden game was more exciting, though the Swedes were unlucky to draw. We watched this match in a low-ceilinged Korean café next to our guest house. Some wealthy

Indian tourists made us a gift of the last Scotch in their bottle, too.

Sunday 11 June 2006, Between Manali and Sanghol

It was awful inside the bus today. At first we stopped every fifteen minutes: to change a tyre, so Paravesh the headmaster could see his uncle or buy a shawl, for free lunch in a temple. We wouldn't have made it back by Sunday night if we continued at that pace.

The kids were singing (more like shouting) to the same few songs. I felt myself going slowly mad every time they clapped and shouted so I retreated into my noise cancelling headphones and angry rap. It came so that the stops, instead of an annoying delay, were a welcome relief from the crush. I didn't have a seat, but a tiny bench in the aisle, pressed upon by four kids from all sides.

It was lovely when they let us go on the roof. I lay down, almost comfortable, and slept for a few hours in sunny quiet (not counting my music).

Tuesday 13 June 2006, Sanghol

"Strawberry Delight Crunch³⁴ avoids dowdy or slacking & keeps one alert, smart attractive, young, impressive, dominating and longevity."

Tuesday 20 June 2006, Sanghol

I had a strange dream last night. In my dream, I had returned to England as if it were today, before my time here has finished. That was not strange in itself – ordinary, rather. The strange thing was that in my dream I didn't want to be at home. I felt strongly that I wasn't finished in India, that I still had my travels to come, and I couldn't be wasting time at home when I should be still out there. When I woke up, I was relieved to find myself in bed in Sanghol. That worries me.

That aside, there are only ten more days left here!

Friday 23 June 2006, Sanghol

That bastard Kashmiri Farooq ripped me off! He sold me a wool scarf at the beginning of the month at the price of pashmina.

Friday 23 June 2006, Sanghol

I went to Jaisinghpur and commissioned a tailor made suit⁴⁹⁻⁵⁰ and set of pyjamas today. Pretty cool!

Monday 26 June 2006, Sanghol

I didn't confront the Kashmiri con-artist over the weekend at McLeod⁵⁴⁻⁶⁵. Unfortunately, I didn't get to see the Dalai Lama either. For the second time, the office was closed when I was trying to get my pass. The rest of the group saw the Dalai Lama teach, though I don't think they found it a transfiguring experience. I was rather occupied with something that came up at [Spellhold Studios](#) recently, though at this stage I can't tell how it will turn out. It's been on my mind today and yesterday, in an almost obsessive way that I haven't felt since I left England three months ago. It reminds me of what my life and concerns were like at home – largely imaginary, though terribly important – which haven't been relevant here. Every time I speak to my friends online, it strikes me how blasé they are to my surroundings – but nothing else could be expected, because for everyone else, their lives are going on as per usual. An avatar and my words are the same from anywhere in the world.

It's the beginning of the last week now, which means there are only a few days left before we leave Sanghol (forever?) The teaching is all but over, I'm thinking about packing, and my time is up. So, what do I think about the whole affair?

I don't think I made a very good teacher. I know full well the difference between when I put in the effort and when I really don't, and I know for sure that the children^{5:5-20} of Ambika School have not received my full determined effort to share my knowledge over the last two and a half months. It's not that I was bad at teaching, but I am talking of the many days and even weeks when I would not be teaching them. Perhaps I would play or talk with some kids, perhaps I would sketch⁵¹⁻⁵³, sometimes I would just read. It's hard to tell if the level of their English has really improved. I hope I've had some impact.

As long as I can remember, I've never been away from my home, family, friends and country for so long as now. I do miss all that, without a doubt. However, what is surprising is how flexible and malleable normality is. It seems perfectly natural that I am living with these four people⁷⁵ that I have only known for one percent of my entire life, who not long ago were strangers to me. There hasn't been any tension in our house and we all get on well.

Our home in Sanghol is a castle that keeps India out. I spend many afternoons having quite forgotten where I am, and when I remember, I still experience culture shock sometimes. What the hell am I doing in India, and can it be

possible I won't be home for two more months?! In the village I feel part alien, part celebrity, part regular villager. I may know more local people here than I do in my home village.

I've got (almost) entirely used to the dangerous driving and the haphazard electrical wiring. I nearly forgot to mention power cuts, water economy, burning rubbish and toilet paper and washing body and clothes with a bucket, as if everyone did that. I can occasionally string words together in Hindi and sometimes get the gist of what is being said to me, even if I haven't learnt the words. I decided weeks ago that I want to come back to this country after I leave. Not soon, but maybe after I visit Japan first. There's so much here I still want to see: the beaches of the South when they aren't being washed away by Monsoon, the moonscapes of Spiti and Ladakh, the vast tea plantations of Darjeeling, and just to look at the Golden Temple one more time.

Allow me to review or summarise my time so far. I've seen the Taj Mahal^{1:9} and the Golden Temple^{5:79}; travelled by bus^{8:36}, jeep, train^{3:1} and elephant; marvelled at amazing mountains^{4:38}, views^{3:16} and sunsets; eaten all kinds of amazing Indian dishes^{5:58} in restaurants, homes and on leaves^{6:10}; born witness to a grand Indian wedding, complete with dancing, food and ceremony; suffered whisky-induced^{8:15} hangovers, traveller's diarrhoea and food poisoning; taught children and umpired cricket; bought handicraft in rosewood, marble, wool, silk, metal and cloth; written more than twenty two thousand words and taken almost four hundred pictures; read Tess of the D'Urbervilles, Ulysses and Anna Karenina; converted to Hinduism, married a local girl and grown a beard.

Ok, maybe I was lying about the Hinduism and local girl.

Have I enjoyed myself? Hell yes. Have I found myself? I didn't smoke enough weed. Have I matured as a person? I think a little, maybe.

Tuesday 27 June 2006, Sanghol

Yesterday evening Andy found out that his grandfather had died.

Thursday 29 June 2006, Sanghol

We played a drinking game last night, called "Ring of Fire" (entirely unconnected with the "ring of fire" associated with curries). It was quite fun! I found out that two of the three Sanghol girls would (if forced to choose) sooner sleep with Andy than me: boo. The third wasn't asked. Also Katie got absolutely wasted⁷²⁻⁷⁴ on just a few drops of gin.

The teaching is finally over! As if to mark this, the Monsoon rains started today. Tomorrow, we're taking all our bags to Dharamsala, not to return.

Saturday 1 July 2006, McLeod Ganj

Katie wrote this poem in tribute to Sanghol for our tips-book. I love it.

"Ode To Sanghol" by Katie Duval

*We will miss...
The spiders in the hall,
Geckos on the wall,
Dragons in the loo,
Weevils in the stew,
The hammering on the door
Of kids demanding more
chalk or stars or rope.
They'll never give up hope!
The overflowing drain,
The never-ending rain;
The drip drip drip of sweat,
T-shirts always wet;
Cornie and Vineet,
The locals in the street;
Gin and Chicken dates
With Choudree and his mates;
Team volleyball next door,
'Till your palms are rubbed raw;
Chipatis and rice galore,
'Til you're groaning on the floor;
Slaps about the chin
From Mother with toothless grin;
"Chawal", "Dhaal" and "Doodh"
Day and night, some food.
Much much more to write
But power-cuts killed the light.*

Edward Jonathan Plant

A Passage Through India

*So without more ado
We wish Sanghol adieu.
Our very merry time
immortalised in rhyme!*

Part IX

Sunday 2 July 2006, Delhi

Delhi is a horrible place. Fortunately, I'm in an air conditioned hotel room right now. The girls have left in search of a bikini wax and until they return, I have a little time to put Part VIII in order. Tomorrow morning about half the group, myself included, catch a plane to Cochin, in central Kerala, south India. The rest have already boarded a train which will take over fifty hours to arrive at the same destination. I think they're perfectly stupid. One girl only is going home at some ungodly hour tomorrow. I (and I am not alone) am glad to see her go, but not as nearly as glad as she is to leave.

No, wait, that sounds horrible. It's not that she's been bullied or anything like that. She's been determined not to enjoy anything, not touch the local food (chiefly eating chocolate sent from home), and to talk of nothing but her perpetual break-ups and reconciliations with her awful boyfriend (who had been going out with her for three weeks before she left and accused her of selfishness for coming).

My camera broke on Friday, perhaps due to the humidity. Andraea and I intend to go shopping for new cameras this afternoon in Connaught Place, New Delhi.

Monday 3 July 2006, Above Hyderabad

My ears are giving me a bit of trouble up here, but I've had worse. I still have a cold (or it could be 'flu.), so I've been coughing a lot. Yesterday in Delhi was Sunday, so the camera shops were closed. I'm hoping I can find a camera when I get to Cochin. I finished Crime And Punishment in the airport.

Monday 3 July 2006, Fort Cochin

My first impression of Kerala from the plane was of palm trees, stretching without break to the end of the horizon. The contrast to Delhi and Dharamsala is refreshing: in Delhi, the humidity was eighty percent and the temperature was above forty in the middle of the day, and in Dharamsala the temperature was fine but the mountains were shrouded in mist. In Himachal the terrain was mountainous with valleys and steep drops below the dirt track. On the way here from the airport we saw huge advertising billboards, expensive hotels and well dressed Indian pedestrians. We drove in a four wheel drive taxi on a straight tarmac double-lane road!

After settling into a hotel, we strolled onto the shore¹. It was quite dirty, and the weather was grey, but I could still gaze into the Indian Ocean², seen for the first time. There were also scores of fishmongers on the shore selling (hopefully) fresh seafood. But then, I hate fish anyway.

For dinner, we were seated at a smart restaurant. It's been so long since I've been given complimentary bread and butter before my meal. I ordered beef! It was really good. Unfortunately alcohol was off the menu, or I would have had a glass of red wine.

I'm already very happy to be here.

Tuesday 4 July 2006, Fort Cochin

Today the Americans celebrate ridding themselves of the British.

Wednesday 5 July 2006, Fort Cochin

Last night we attended a performance of Kathakali, a traditional Keralan dance. The make up and costume takes hours to apply and, once finished, is elaborate and colourful. The dancers tell the story by sign language, accompanied by drummers and a narrator singing. What we saw was an abridged version for tourists, but an entertaining spectacle nevertheless. I have to say I prefer contemporary film and theatre.

In the afternoon we looked at churches, the oldest European churches in India, built by the Portugese in the eighteenth century. The Portugese influence is also the reason I could order beef on Monday night. Portugal knocked England out of the World Cup, but bless their cotton socks for beef's sake. Lamentably, the Catholic church was decorated in the tacky Indian style.

I took the bus to the mainland town Ernakulum with Andraea, and we both succeeded in buying digital cameras. Fortunately, my photo fingers haven't been out of action for too long. Unfortunately, I have no pictures of the Kathakali.

Thursday 6 July 2006, Fort Cochin

Today we took a boat⁴ cruise around the Kerala backwaters. I haven't been boating, either rowing or sailing, for quite some time, and it was extremely relaxing and pleasant to be on the water again. I was reminded of seeing the Okavango delta in Botswana in a mokoro. This time, the boats and waterways

were much bigger and also I wasn't fearful of imminent or prolonged death.

Forests of palm trees⁵⁻⁶ lounged over the water from the riverbanks. Local fishermen were out on the waters in their small canoes⁸, punting by or even sailing¹³⁻¹⁵.

We stopped for a botany lesson and a look at a factory which turned mussels⁹ into a white powder used in medicine. While we were being lectured in a thick accent about fruits and leaves, a cute bunny rabbit¹¹ distracted all our attention. Amazingly, Joelle had a carrot handy.

For lunch, we had typical Keralan fare¹⁹ and in the afternoon moved into long canoes for navigating thinner waterways. We saw several electric blue kingfishers, though I found getting a good picture difficult. We alighted, and were given coconuts, freshly beaten²²⁻²⁴ from the tree, to drink from. I didn't actually like the milk much: I thought it tasted like off water. The process of making rope from coconut twine was also revealed to us. Spinning²⁵ is involved.

Tomorrow afternoon Sasha takes a train to Goa alone. Ironically she will be in my home city London before me, and I will visit her Melbourne before she returns home. I think she's quite sad to be leaving us, although she might have a great time in Europe over the next few weeks. We had a good farewell dinner²⁶⁻³¹ and wished her well.

Friday 7 July 2006, Fort Cochin

Elephants³²⁻⁶⁵ are cool. And when I say cool I mean totally fucking sweet.

Here are some pictures of elephants.

Some facts about elephants:

1. Elephants are mammals.
2. Elephants are really big, even the young ones.
3. Elephants are best cleaned with coconuts by tourist³⁸ groups.
4. Elephants live only off bananas, hand fed⁵⁴ to them by a bearded man wearing shorts and a hat.
5. Elephants have bristly hairs⁶³ all over their body.
6. Elephants' trunks^{57,60} are slightly elastic! Look at them stretch!
7. Elephants like to dance⁵⁸.

Part X

Monday 10 July 2006, Jungle Retreat

This is the most awesome resort. It's not actually in Kerala, but in Tamil Nadu. Therefore Tamil Nadu is fast becoming my favourite state in the country. There's a tree-house⁶ overlooking the pool⁴, which itself is encircled by mountains⁵. All the food is included in the price, and we can have as much as we want. The setting around here is beautiful and it's a great shame that we are here for so short a time. On the way here we saw some tea¹⁻³ plantations. Seeing tea plantations was one of my ambitions of things to do in this country. Andy and rest of the girls are in Munnar right now, which is also tea country. From there they should be able to see rolling hills of tea.

Both the Wimbledon's Men Singles Final and the World Cup Final took place last night. I enjoyed watching Federer owning Nadar 6-0 7-6 6-4. I should definitely play more tennis when I get home. The exercise would be good for me, and I'd also like to improve my game. It's so easy, as well, having your very own court in the back garden. I didn't stay up for the football (which started some time after midnight) but I think Italy won, which was quite a surprise.

Before breakfast this morning, the seven of us (plus a guide) trekked up into the mountains. We reached a rocky summit, from where we could see amazing views⁷⁻¹⁶. The valley stretched away from us, one solitary hill rising in the middle. On the other side were craggy mountains. The whole three hundred and sixty degree panorama¹² was pretty spectacular. On the way down we saw some gorgeous waterfalls¹⁷⁻²⁰.

In the evening, we went out in an open jeep²³ for an evening safari²³⁻²⁹. We saw a few elephants²⁸ (though the light was too bad for good photos), a couple of peacocks, and a charming blonde Dutch Family. The girls all fell in love with the cute ten year old blonde son Stefan ("There are seven biscuits left, so if you each want one, it is possible"). While out, we passed over the state border between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, so we've visited one more Indian state! There are twenty-eight states in India, and we've been to Delhi, Rajahstan, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab (Amritsar is in Punjab), Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. We'll be in Goa by Wednesday, if we manage to catch our train tomorrow. In order to achieve this, we will have to get out of bed almost before we get in. It's going to be hard, but I feel that the little time we've spent in the Jungle Retreat has been worth the journey getting here.

Wednesday 12 July 2006, Palolem Beach

It's taken us a fair old journey to get here, Goa. Our last night at the Jungle

Retreat was a party. The rich Indian tourists staying at the Retreat bought us all drinks and gave us tips on the best places to go in Goa. Since the drinks were free, I switched from beer to whiskey on the rocks. As I mentioned in my last entry, our plan was to leave by taxi for Fort Cochin at four in the morning. However, Fort Cochin was south west of the Retreat, and Goa is north. It was partly for this reason that we were going to stay up all night drinking (as if one needs a reason). But the Indian dudes hatched a far better plan, that we head west and catch the train as it passes up the coast. This meant that we'd save time travelling, and could actually sleep.

Thursday 13 July 2006, Palolem Beach

This beach³⁰⁻³⁶ is generally agreed to be the best in the country. Well, no doubt it's a nice beach, as beaches go, but I was never wild about them. Besides which, when I walked along it yesterday, it started raining hard. There's nothing much else to do here: the village is small, empty, and most of the shops are closed for monsoon. There are a few good restaurants, however. To be honest I'm bored here and we'll be moving to the north of Goa tomorrow.

Sunday 16 July 2006, Aurangabad

Today Rachel, Andraea and I have been exposed to the dirty and crowded side of India. Yesterday afternoon we boarded the Goa Express. Getting tickets for this train involved a fair bit of panic. But I get ahead of myself, and have a few days' travel to write up since my last entry in Palolem.

I haven't even mentioned that last Wednesday terrorists killed over a hundred commuters on a train in Mumbai (Bombay). I heard about it on the train to Goa. I think it's because of Kashmir. Fucking Kashmiris. I don't feel myself to be in any danger, but I cannot understand why "Team Andy" (that is, Andy and the four girls he has been travelling with) decided to go to Mumbai immediately after the terrorist attack. From what I heard of conversations between Rachel and the other group, they aren't sure either. They have quite an intensive travel itinerary which I don't think is very realistic. Never mind, that's why we are in charge of our own plans!

So, it was Friday that we took the bus to Madgaon (central Goa) then Panaji (north Goa, state capital). Goa is so incredibly small relative to India that an hour or two in a public bus can take you anywhere in the state. Rachel and Jasmine had gone ahead of us on Thursday to meet Team Andy in Panaji, as well as attempt to dissuade them from going to a flooded crowded metropolis under attack. If possible, they were to book us train tickets out of Goa to here, Aurangabad in the state of Maharashtra, the ninth state we have been to now.

We, that is to say, Katie, Andraea, Joelle and I, having left Emily in Palolem to wait for the other Katie, arrived at the hotel we knew Rachel and Jasmine to be

staying at, but were told they had gone. At this moment, we received a hurried and unclear text from them. A phone call established that no train tickets were available for four days, and that they had gone to the next station Vasco in the slight hope of booking some reserved on the tourist quota. Worried that we wouldn't be able to get out of here and all our travel plans would be thrown into disarray, we urgently directed our jeep to Vasco.

We were in luck. Vasco was only half an hour's drive away and we found the flustered pair at the reservation office. There were seats reserved for tourists and they had managed to get seats, though not in 2AC but in the more regular third class non air-conditioned, or Sleeper. We filled out the forms and with great relief had a train ticket departing the next day, Saturday.

I was awake at a surprisingly early hour on Saturday, between seven and eight, in time to go to Old Goa with Katie. Old Goa used to be the state capital until it was abandoned due to sickness. When we alighted the bus, we saw a large park, with large Portugese churches around the edges. First we walked into the Church of St. Francis of Assisi³⁷⁻³⁸. It's an impressively large white-washed church that wouldn't look out of place in Portugal or Italy. Inside³⁹⁻⁴¹, it was not at all tacky like the smaller churches in Kerala. In fact, there were some detailed woodwork and paintings around the church.

From there, we walked across the park^{42,47} to the Basilica of Bom Jesus⁴³. We saw the body of St. Francis of Assisi⁴⁶. The story goes that the body didn't rot for many years after his death, despite being covered with quicklime. The (real) golden statue and front of the Basilica around the altar⁴⁴⁻⁴⁵ were truly breathtaking.

The Se Cathedral⁴⁸ was the largest of all the churches. However, they ran out of money for the painting, so the interior of the cathedral is spacious and white, which makes it feel rather empty and plain.

The Archbishop's Palace⁴⁹ is officially closed to the public, but the Rough Guide to India suggested trying to persuade the caretaker to let you have a look around. Katie and I loitered on the steps outside the gate, but didn't really expect it to be as easy as smiling at a sweeping lady that appeared at the window. Within five minutes, we had gained entry to the old palace in exactly the same way the Rough Guide reporter had done. No archbishop has used the residence, a white villa between the Cathedral and the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, for a few hundred years now. Inside we could see some wall paintings, a table set for dinner⁵⁰, some statues⁵¹, the view onto the park⁵² and many large empty rooms.

We visited just one more church, of St. Catejan⁵³. I don't know who Catejan was, but the design is modelled on St. Peter's in Rome. A bit smaller than the other three churches, this was perhaps the most tasteful⁵⁴: it was lit from above by a dome⁵⁵. We were exhausted of churches at this point, and started the journey back to Panjim, then to Vasco train station.

There were only two points of interest of the train journey to Aurangabad in Maharashtra, central India. The first was the henna tattoo⁵⁶ on the arm of David, an Indian dope-head on the train. The design is very similar to

Sasuke's⁵⁷ that I wanted myself. The second was that at four o' clock in the morning Jasmine, accompanied by Katie, left the train at Pune to get to the hospital. Jasmine was very sick and I'm a bit surprised (as well as relieved) to hear that they managed to get help safely. We met up with them a day or two later, and they didn't have to endure Manmad Junction.

I got off the train at about ten this morning at Manmad Junction to change trains. Manmad Junction, Platform 5-6, was crowded, dirty and home to as many flies as people. Filthy and destitute beggars and cripples now lay, now squatted, now approached the extraordinary foreigners with silent pleas for money. I discovered that the toilets were locked, which might explain why one woman squatted on the platform, lifted up her sari, and pissed right there. This, and every other train station, smelt of urine. The cries of the platform wallahs, offering samosas, fruit, chai and anything else, added to the picture. A squad of armed policeman lounged behind the less-obviously-grubby pillar that we sat under. They were there to reassure the train goers in wake of the bombings in Mumbai, but they didn't make me feel at all safe. In fact, I've been afraid of Indian policeman since I arrived, though I've not really encountered any. I don't trust the police here, and to whom can you turn if a policeman demands a baksheesh (bribe)?

What made the greatest impression on me of Manmad Junction, though, was the flies. There were hundreds of various sizes, clustering around the food being sold, the pools of urine and the people. I have found it quite impossible to kill an Indian fly with my bare hands (except when they are most vulnerable, mating) and could do nothing but endure the many feet and probing tongues, or flap my hands continually.

An hour went past. Our train arrived.

Due to the haste with which we had booked our tickets in Vasco, we had reserved seats in Standard Class. I wasn't really aware of this until we got on. Until now, I have always travelled in a sleeper carriage, whether Sleeper, 3AC or 2AC, which means I get a bunk to myself, even if it can't quite fit my six feet and two inches. There are no bunks in Standard Class, and most people do not bother to reserve their seat (or even have a ticket at all, apparently). Every single seat on the carriage was occupied and some were standing. We squeezed through the aisle with our bulky rucksacks, and I found that all our reserved seats were occupied. I showed them my ticket and the miscreants agreed to move, just as soon as they finished their lunch. With no hurry in her movements or concern for the two girls standing with two bags apiece, she munched every last morsel of her food for a few minutes, then disappeared.

Really we were quite lucky to get our seats, and that the carriage aisle was not also packed with standing passengers. The temperature was warm outside but it was still before noon. The heat of a crowded carriage in Summer must be something else.

My iRiver ran out of battery shortly after we arrived at Manmad Junction, so that avenue of mental escape was closed to me. Instead, I looked out onto the boring plains so different to the tropical paradise I left behind in the South, slept a little, and read some War and Peace. I hadn't mentioned it before, but I started reading War and Peace in Cochin. Katie's parents had posted it to her in Sanghol, but it's hardly the ideal book to take travelling, so she would have left it behind. I rescued it and I'm now almost half way through and enjoying it immensely.

Tuesday 18 July 2006, Jalgaon

On arrival at Aurangabad on Sunday, we were really lucky to book our tickets to Delhi just before the reservation office closed at two. It's normal to be followed by rickshaw drivers at bus or train station, but there was one who seemed to be either the best rickshaw driver in town, or an elaborate con-man. He had several books of recommendations written by foreigners in English, French, Spanish, Hebrew and Korean, as well as a newspaper cutting from some Spanish paper.

Wednesday 19 July 2006, Jalgaon

I've just tramped around sweaty Jalgaon trying to change a traveller's cheque. Eventually I gave up and used an ATM, though I had walked a few miles with my laptop on my back by this point, so I'm hot and a bit pissed off. Our train to Delhi leaves in a few hours, and we'll arrive at about lunchtime tomorrow.

Last night I said goodbye to both Katies, Janaki and Andy for the final time. It was quite a sad moment. From the Sanghol house I'm still with only Andraea. I've been with her these whole three weeks; out of the whole group she's the most like my mother. I could be sure of an organised Plan if I stuck with her. Already I miss Sasha, Katie and Andy. Perhaps it will feel very lonely in Australia without all my AV friends.

On Monday and Tuesday we visited the Ellora and Ajanta Caves respectively. They're both World Heritage Sites, abandoned but rediscovered by the British in the nineteenth century. Ellora has Hindu⁵⁸⁻⁷², Buddhist⁷³⁻⁷⁸ and Jain⁷⁹⁻⁸¹ caves with lots of sculptures. They are also home to bats⁸², which smell awful. The Ajanta are plainer, but have detailed paintings of Buddha's previous lives inside. The guide who took us around the Ajanta explained the stories very interestingly, whereas our Ellora guide was harder to understand. Infuriatingly, every few minutes as we went round Ajanta, someone, usually sleazy Indian men would ask if they could have "one snap" of us. Lots of people didn't ask but just took photos. What the hell did they come to see, the caves or the Angrej?! Angrej is a Hindi word meaning "foreigner" or "pale face". I have to

say I'm thoroughly sick of pervy Indian men and cheating touts, rickshaw-drivers and Kashmiris, which is to say, a large portion of the Indian male population.

But enough of that. In the last few weeks leading up to this travel period, I was very concerned that the Monsoon would ruin the holiday. Now that I've been in it for three weeks, I realise it's made no impression on this journal, as I've quickly got used to it. Yes, in the south it rained most days, often hard and without warning. It was worse in Goa than Kerala. I never went out without my raincoat. Yet it hasn't been so bad, and the rain didn't really dampen (so to speak) our time. Prices are much better, as it's easier to get good discounts in off season. Apparently sometimes it can rain for several days straight, but either we've been lucky this year, or the worst of the Monsoon is falling in Himachal Pradesh at the moment.

Friday 21 July 2006, Delhi

Am back in my least favourite city on the face of the earth. It isn't all bad, though. I had a hair cut and beard trim, as well as a head and face massage, in the Radisson hotel. It was beautifully relaxing and now I have lost the resemblance to Shaggy (from Scooby Doo).

Oh, this is the bit when I conclude India, right? Well, let's see. I've been here four months now. My nineteenth birthday seems so distant. Returning home is a prospect I can almost, but not quite, reach.

Strangely, I find it difficult to recall with absolute clarity what living in Sanghol was like. When I was at Eton, I couldn't imagine living at home, and the opposite was true in the holidays. In just the same way, I've subconsciously put Sanghol behind me. When I do finally get home, and on to University, I expect I will feel the same way about my whole round the world trip, and that's a shame. I also remember the anticlimax of returning home from Africa. After a few days I was a bit bored and wondered what it was I had been looking forward to before.

Besides, I have five more weeks of travel, which I anticipate to be great. I've said several goodbyes to leaving friends already, and tomorrow will be the last time, also the last time I see any of them for several months. I won't be truly alone for long, though. My aunt and uncle Jo and Clive will (er... I hope) pick me up from Melbourne airport, which I am scheduled to arrive at early Sunday morning.

Farewell, India. My attitude towards this country has swung between love and hate, usually several times a day. It's been said that India is the country of opposites, and I couldn't agree more. Where else can I be treated like a new best friend, a stupid foreigner, a walking cash machine, and a prince, all in one morning?

Part XI

Saturday 22 July 2006, Between Delhi and Hong Kong Airport

Oh my fucking God but I haven't had a good start to my journey. For our last dinner we went to the luxurious Radisson hotel, and I absolutely stuffed my face with about eight courses of their buffet. I even had a glass of wine. It was great at the time, but now I wish I hadn't gone at all.

I could barely sleep at all afterwards. It was too hot, and stomach pains kept me staggering to the toilet and back. I splashed cold water all over my body several times in the night to cool me. This meant that Andraea couldn't sleep either.

At the small hour of three thirty, some kind of dimensional miracle occurred which allowed us to squeeze six people and their many bags into two taxis. At Delhi airport, I was first relieved that there weren't so many people there as I had expected. I was also glad that I checked in both my bags without having to pay an overweight charge.

These two trifles were completely outweighed by two disasters. The first was the discovery that I needed a VISA to enter Australia! I had no idea. Couldn't British citizens freely travel anywhere in the Commonwealth? The very helpful Cathay Pacific staff contacted Canberra, and at length procured for me an electronic VISA. I have nothing to show for it, though, and I haven't tried to get into Australia yet, so it isn't confirmed in my mind.

Far worse, just as I had finally got my VISA, I turned around, fell to my knees, and violently spewed my entire dinner onto the airport floor. A doctor was summoned: she took my pulse, talked to me and bade me eat two pills. I decided that I wanted to fly today, and not wait in Delhi alone hoping to feel better. If I could just get to Melbourne, I thought, all would be fine. I was deposited into a wheelchair and wheeled past the queues to my gate. Andraea, Joelle, Emily and Harriet, however, were denied this preferential treatment, and had to wait in line. My flight was called and everyone else on my flight filed through the final checkpoint. Still they had not managed to get to me. I was really worried that I would not be able to say goodbye. The last passenger at the gate, I insisted that I wait just a few minutes.

At last they came over. I began to cry and hugged them all tightly, promising to let them know when I arrived safely. Then I was gone, being wheeled onto the plane.

Before the plane had even taken off, I was feeling nauseous once more. While I was actually explaining to a stewardess what was wrong with me, I snatched a sick bag and vomited the litres of water that I had gulped down previously. Again, just after the seat belt signs had winked off, I lurched towards the toilet

but retreated into my seat and was again sick.

Because I was ill, the check in staff had given me two seats on their own. I lay down across them, though they were not nearly long enough to encompass my legs, and managed to sleep.

Since I slept, I haven't been sick yet. Also, my ears were as good as gold and gave me no problem. If I had had to deal with immense pressure in my head as well as vomiting, it would probably have been a low point of my entire life.

Saturday 22 July 2006, Hong Kong Airport

Well, here I am now in the clean and modern Hong Kong airport, waiting another hour or two before I can board the plane.

Shit. When I thought I heard my name being called over the PA, I wasn't mistaken. Somehow I managed to lose my boarding pass and round the world ticket! Incredibly, somebody has found it, and I should get it in about half an hour. I can't even think about how disastrous the situation would be if I had simply lost it.

Looks like I suck at travelling the world on my own. I hope I improve.

Sunday 23 July 2006, Melbourne

Despite everything, I have arrived safely in Australia!

Sunday 30 July 2006, Melbourne

I've been here a week now, and not a word in my journal. This is probably because it's just too much like home staying with my aunt and uncle¹. I mean a few things by this: the house is equipped with all the modern Western luxuries such as an electric kettle, hot bath/shower, fridge, oven, electric blanket and broadband internet access. I can help myself to Timtams and make myself tea whenever I please. Also, with internet access and a snap decision to install SUSE Linux 10.1 on my laptop, there have been more interesting things to do with a computer than write my journal.

So what adventures have I experienced during this period of journal silence? I've been into Melbourne City a couple of times. It's clean, small and pretty cool. So different to Delhi! There are no rickshaw drivers (the trams are excellent), not a trace of the filth and rubbish. It's winter here so at first I was reminded more strongly of Stockholm than my last visit to Melbourne for 2003

Christmas.

I have visited Melbourne Zoo! I was a bit disappointed that there weren't many wallabies as I remembered. Perhaps I was thinking of some other park on the East Coast with many cute wallabies. Nevertheless, I saw an orang-utan and her new baby²⁻³, and the butterfly⁶⁻⁹ enclosure was really cool.

I've seen two films at the cinema: Tristram Shandy and Fearless. The former was original and amusing. Fearless was shown as part of the Melbourne Film Festival. The director was present at the screening and talked to the audience about his film, Jet Li, and the genre wushu (not to be confused with wusha). Chinese nationalism was present in the film, which I didn't much like, but I suppose most American films also promote American values. Actually, my favourite character in the film was a Japanese tea-lover. Which reminds me – I found a shop in Melbourne's Chinatown dedicated only to anime and anime-related merchandise. I never knew before that such places existed and I was very excited. I came out with most films ever made by Studio Ghibli, and a Full Metal Alchemist necklace. I also bought some pretty fashionable new clothes in the road leading into the City.

Monday 31 July 2006, Alice Springs

I left my laptop at Jo's house in Melbourne, so I am writing on a matching Aboriginal-design notebook and pen¹⁹. You are spared my abysmal handwriting, luckily enough. The only question is whether I will be able to read this at all when I come to copy my words into Open Office.

I had to get up quite early this morning (six) to catch my flight. It was close: Jo had to chase the tram in her car for me to leap out and catch it, and I only managed to make the last boarding call at the gate by jumping the huge check-in queue.

By far the suckiest thing to happen today was the moment when my Indian bought camera broke! There's no time to have it repaired, the warranty is in Melbourne, and besides, there are no technicians in Alice Springs. So with my Uluru bus leaving tomorrow morning, I had no choice but to buy my third camera of my travel. I hope the new one lasts longer than the last.

Every tourist and his leader around here seems to be wearing an Australian outback hat. Most are brand new and look a bit naff as obvious souvenirs. On the other hand, it might be nice to replace my floppy grubby version. Actually, I'd rather keep it and get a new hat from the Wild Mid-West America, Scottsdale, that three-horses-and-a-McDonalds town in Arizona.

Earlier today I visited the Reptile Centre here. Fortunately I walked in on a demonstration, when three different lizards and a python were taken out of their cages and handled¹⁸ by the visitors. Snakes both fascinate and scare me. I wonder if having a pet snake would be such a ludicrous idea.

I bought a corduroy jacket that was on sale this afternoon. I'll have to carry it

around in my backpack for the rest of the week, though.

It's quite fun to be travelling alone. Never in my life have I had such freedom. If the idea lodged in my head, I could settle down in Australia or America and not return home. I have no intention of doing that, of course, but I could. Will I ever again have such an opportunity to travel like this? I hope so: I think I've caught the "travelling bug", and I'm not talking about diarrhoea!

Monday 31 July 2006, A bar in Alice Springs

No matter how many different names the Australians come up with for their beer, it's all lager. Good stuff, though. I might have steak for dinner. How ironic that this "Australian" pen was made in Korea.

I think I've changed my mind already about travelling alone. It would be nice to have a mate to share a drink with right now. With a little luck, though, there'll be some guys or "Sheilas" doing Uluru with me. I'll find out at the early hour of seven o' clock tomorrow morning!

The camping element and terrain will be quite similar to Namibia, I expect, with perhaps redder sand but the same faithful Jacaru hat. I wonder what impression, if any, the Rock will make on me. Will I write as enthusiastically as Bill Bryson did of it, or will it not impress?

Tuesday 1 August 2006, Alice Springs

I've met up with my group, but we haven't set off yet. We've had to change the bus, and then the trailer, as we have one more person than expected. Last night I dreamt that there were snakes in the dormitory. Maybe going to the Reptile House wasn't such a good idea.

Tuesday 1 August 2006, Alice Springs

We've just stopped at Simpson's Gap²¹⁻²⁶, a jagged ochre-red canyon. Also, I saw wild rock wallabies²⁵ for the first time here: so cute! It always brings a grin to my face to see a hopping wallaby.

Wednesday 2 August 2006, King's Canyon

Last night was pretty awesome. We were camping, sleeping³¹ under millions of

stars in swag bags²⁸ around a camp-fire³⁰. Sitting by the fire, with a plate of tucker and a tinny in the hand: that's the good life.

There's an English couple in the group who've been to India several times: it was nice to have someone to share my experiences with. Most people here are British travellers. There's even one girl from Beaconsfield! Many have been working in Australia or New Zealand. It makes me sorry to be spending so little time in Australia or America. I'll have to come back to the USA one day and see Washington, New York, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and the rest. Maybe I'll drop into Canada while I'm at it. Anyway, it's good being in a group of nice people again. I'm one of the youngest here, but you wouldn't think it to look at me.

Wednesday 2 August 2006, King's Canyon

I've just finished a three hour walk³⁵⁻⁴⁵ through the arid King's Canyon. You reach the Canyon by first scaling "Heart Attack Hill"³²⁻³³, which isn't as hard as it sounds. We started just as the sun was rising³⁴, and saw just one rock wallaby silhouetted against the pale sky.

King's Canyon may not be as large or impressive as the Grand Canyon, but I have that to look forward to. I still enjoyed the fresh air and the rock passing under me. I love the ochre sand and rocks of the Australian Centre. It has a very different kind of beauty to the Himalayas. I'm still sick of plains from my Christmas Namibia trip, though, and there's a lot of flat land here.

Wednesday 2 August 2006, Between King's Canyon and Uluru

We're driving towards Uluru now to see the sun set. It's only half past ten, though, and we're not expected to arrive until tea-time.

Wednesday 2 August 2006, Between King's Canyon and Uluru

It's now twenty past one and although we're still a hundred kilometres from Uluru, I thought we had reached the Rock already. It was in fact Mt. Conner⁴⁶, which our tour guide Fiona calls "Uluru's ugly sister".

Wednesday 2 August 2006, Uluru

Now I am sitting at Sunset Boulevard, a few hundred metres from Uluru⁴⁷. As rocks go, it is damn big. The outline it creates in front of the blue sky makes it seem somehow more “real” than the landscape around it. It's the focal point of attention (notwithstanding young British females in the group). In an hour or so the sun will set and hopefully Uluru will glow. The half-moon is directly overhead and the sky is completely clear so it should be a beautiful sunset and starry night.

Thursday 3 August 2006, Yulara Resort

It was a perfect sunset⁵¹⁻⁵³! We had a barbecue⁵⁵ (the sausages were good) around the fire, and dragged our swags to the top of a hill. This lookout gave us an uninterrupted view of Uluru's silhouette, the Milky Way and all the stars in the sky.

I lay, cosy and sleepy, and wondered at these great distant nuclear orbs before my eyes closed.

My phone woke me up at six, but when I opened my eyes again at twenty past, I was alone on the hill. Cursing, I donned my shoes and rolled up my swag, and trotted down to the bus, scared that they would leave without me if I delayed any longer. But when I reached the camp, my fears were assuaged, and I just managed to stuff some toast in my face and get some tea down my throat.

Perhaps because of our late start (for which I was partly responsible), when we arrived at Uluru for sunrise, there were already a few hundred tourists shivering in the half-light. The sunlight hit Uluru in a horizontal line⁵⁷, then spread⁵⁸⁻⁵⁹ out until the rock assumed the famous orange-ochre colour.

Visitors are allowed but discouraged⁶² to climb Uluru. It's sacred to the local Ananga tribe, and nearly forty people have died in the attempt. From our group, only “Team Asia”, three Koreans and a Japanese, opted to climb. The rest of us walked around the base, which is a nine kilometre walk. Up close, I hadn't expected to see so many pock-marks⁷¹⁻⁷² and caves⁶⁵. There are even stains and waterfall-pools⁶⁶ caused by the passage of rainwater from the top.

Thursday 3 August 2006, Kata Tjuta

I recommend Karingana⁷⁷⁻⁷⁹ Lookout at Kata Tjuta (also known as the Olga Mountains) to anyone with healthy pairs of legs and eyes. This canyon is beautiful. There's a hill in the middle, so I can see down both directions. In fact, the whole mountain range is spectacular. There's greater variety and even

beauty here than at Uluru: I think I prefer it. There are thirty-six sandstone mountains here, sticking out like... I don't know what. They are very close to Uluru, and geologically the same.

Unlike this morning around Uluru, where I chatted about this, that, and politics with my fellows, this time it's headphones on, phat bass kicking it, and quick march on. I wanted to be alone and enjoy this place in my own way. Now I was told to wait at the lookout at the top of the hill, so I have time to sit, write and look.

A group of thirty Englishmen just turned up. Meh, tourism is its own curse.

When the others arrive, we're heading on to find a good spot to view the sunset⁸⁰⁻⁸².

Tuesday 8 August 2006, Melbourne

I spent the weekend up in the hills outside Melbourne with my uncle's sister Suzanne and her husband Ron. The weekend was soured for me by the belief that my new camera was broken. It turned out to be just the new batteries causing the problem.

We visited another wildlife reserve. There were more wallabies⁸⁶⁻⁸⁸ this time, which was great, but the highlight was the lyre bird in courtship and song. It can mimic anything it hears with amazing accuracy, including human sounds like cars, cameras and chainsaws.

I'm going to "Cali" tomorrow.

Part XII

Wednesday 9 August 2006, San Francisco

I am in the United States of America. I stepped off the plane about an hour ago, and already I have heard 9/11 mentioned in a regular conversation.

My American passport protected me from being shot as I collected my bags, and I'm safely on the bus taking me close to my temporary residence in Marin County.

Now I'm passing lines of war graves. Some look fresh.

I keep seeing churches and starry stripy pieces of cloth.

Help! Everyone is driving on the wrong side of the road!

Am driving over the Golden Gate Bridge. Great view of the harbour. Oh, look, there's Alcatraz.

Friday 11 August 2006, Ross

My host and namesake drove me in his Porsche to a shooting range today. I did some target shooting³⁻⁴ with:

.22

.38 Colt Python²

S&W 9mm

S&W .45 ACP

Beretta 92FS¹

It was fun! I preferred the revolver, finding it easier to shoot with. I was surprised by how much kick you get out of a 9mm.

My host family's house is pretty palatial; it's been renovated in the last six months or so. There's a viewing deck¹⁰, a pool⁹, a Bentley⁸ in the garage and a Porsche in the drive (when the man of the house is at home).

I went into the City yesterday. I attempted to buy [Jurassic 5's](#) best hits album, but mistakenly paid good money for [Jackson 5's](#) best hits. Major blunder!

Sunday 13 August 2006, San Francisco

Yesterday I hiked around the Muir Woods⁵, a redwood forest. Yep, some big trees there. Nice walk.

I'm going to meet Neta for the first time this afternoon. It's kind of exciting.

Monday 14 August 2006, Scottsdale

Neta picked me up from the airport yesterday. I knew to expect it, but she was still shorter and older than I had somehow imagined she would be. At first there was a little awkwardness – we had just met after all, but we very quickly warmed up our relations over a Mexican dinner and beer. She filled me in on the latest forum gossip (which she always seems to pay more attention to than me) but by no means was conversation limited to the online world.

Her fifty-something birthday was recently, for which I and another close internet friend gave her a Voodoo Knife Set¹⁴. I also delivered a carpet that I had bought way back in McLeod. She had been so thoughtful as to buy a “Tea Maker”, a device based in concept on a coffee maker, the purpose of which to allow even the average American to make passable tea.

Tuesday 15 August 2006, Scottsdale

We had breakfast at IHOP. Like the World Series, the International House of Pancakes is a misnomer, based solely, it seems, on the international flags around the American pancake house. I ordered fried eggs, sausage, bacon and strawberry pancakes. I may also have been the first person in the history of the restaurant to order a black tea in Arizonan summer. It is damn hot here, reminding me of the Good Morning Vietnam when Cronauer says “It's hotter than a snake's ass in a wagon rut.”. The breakfast was good, but I expected more mammoth portions.

After I had cleared my plates, Neta treated me to a pair of pairs of shorts to better withstand the weather. We walked about fifty metres further down the parking lot (Neta wanted to drive!) and I felt myself irresistibly drawn into Atomic Comics. It took me a few minutes to find the manga section (which took up most of a large wall), but it was the merchandise that I ended up purchasing. I got myself a blue Naruto t-shirt, two wall hangings and a set of three katanas. Totally sweet.

In the evening I used a monitor in Neta's cupboard to set up dualview¹² for her. Also pretty sweet.

Wednesday 16 August 2006, Scottsdale

We hit the malls again this afternoon (different ones). First stop was an Electronics store. There was an amazing Monster home theatre system on display, worth maybe twenty thousand dollars in all. I myself was turning over in my mind how to organise my own workspace, specifically in purchasing a large screen for anime, gaming, and the upcoming Nintendo Wii. I found the staff very helpful in informing me on all the alternatives, though I still have not organised every detail in my mind.

After gazing lovingly on the many goodies inside the store, we moved to Gilians, a games arcade. I didn't like House of the Dead 4 at all, far preferring its distant cousin Typing of the Dead for the PC. Beach Head was fun, but my favourite game was Ghost Squad. For the first time ever at an arcade game, I made the high score, ranked at number twenty-four. Go me!

Thursday 17 August 2006, Cameron

Neta drove us north to Cameron Trading Post¹⁵⁻¹⁶ on an Indian reservation today. I slept most of the journey, but did look out at some of the landscape. Close to Phoenix were many tall Saguaro cacti, and further out were reddish plains and hills spotted with green from the monsoon. Cameron itself is not far from the Grand Canyon, though is itself an oasis of civilisation in the desert. There's a motel, restaurant and large gift shop. I took the opportunity to buy myself a brand spanking new cowboy hat!

Friday 18 August 2006, Cameron

Neta and I saw an awfully big hole today! But seriously, I've never seen anything quite like the Grand Canyon¹⁷⁻²³. The shadows cast by the pinnacles change throughout the day, providing contrast of light and shade across the canyon. It's really hard to get a sense of perspective.

Saturday 19 August 2006, Scottsdale

gouged out the rock from the plain. I wish I could have seen it – from a great distance, of course. While at the site of the hole, I saw something else very large: the largest behind²⁵ belonging to a human being that I have ever seen! I did my best to record the moment.

On the way back home, we passed through the beautiful Sedona²⁶⁻²⁹, a hillside town reached by a winding forest mountain road. This place is next to some amazing standing rocks that look just like the Western movies.

Friday 25 August 2006, Boston Airport

I arrived in Boston on Monday, but I am here now to leave. I am going home! Since Monday it's something I've been looking forward to more strongly than ever. It was lovely to meet my parents and brother³⁰⁻³¹ at the airport, as I had missed them very much.

However, my time in Massachusetts has mostly been spent looking forward to home. Hopefully getting home won't disappoint.

I went to the bridge at Lexington where the American Revolution began, as well as the house⁴⁰ where my life began. It's probably the smallest house on the road (larger houses in the town are selling for a million dollars or more now) and hasn't changed at all in eighteen years, right down to the wallpaper that my mother put up herself.

Our flight has been delayed thirty-five minutes and we were very early anyway, but I have whisky and power in the British Airways Executive Lounge, courtesy of my father, so I have no complaints!

Monday 28 August 2006, Burnham

My travels have finally ended. So must my journal. My first term at Exeter University starts next month, and I have four weeks of relaxation before I move into the next phase of my life.

Have I learnt anything from my trip, and have I changed at all? Actually, I think that my character has not changed much, if at all. But perhaps I can't tell, myself. Still, I have seen so much, made new friends and gone to so many new places. How can that not be the most awesome way of spending five months before settling into a groove of higher education?

Would I recommend what I did? Certainly I would recommend travel in general to anyone in my position. India is a rewarding but trying place to travel around, and perhaps many people would not enjoy it. I did, though (mostly) and I'll recommend it to any young person with a sense of adventure! Only for God's sake, if you're a girl, take some protection, preferably in the form of a large

Edward Jonathan Plant

A Passage Through India

man with a big stick. It does wonders to keep those Indian men away.

I'd like to thank you for reading this. I hope you enjoyed reading it as I certainly enjoyed writing it!

I've been around the world in five months and have returned – just in in time for tea!