Why does John Malkovich want to kill me?

By Robert Fisk

Why does John Malkovich want to kill me?

PLUS: Rian Malan / Ian Jack / Denis Beckett / Lesley Riddoch / Michael I. Niman / Warren Gerard / L.E.Baskow
“WE MAKE GOOD THINGS BETTER”

Worldwoman, Edinburgh, Scotland

Africawoman, Nairobi, Kenya

Sunday Times, Johannesburg, South Africa

Business Insurance, New York, USA
From The Editor

Back again after a five-year break

COLDTYPE was launched eight years ago to counteract a belief – which still continues – that the best way for newspapers to solve the problem of declining readership is to tinker with the design without too much thought to content. The result of this shortsightedness, I pointed out in my first editor's note, was the production of a "generation of newspapers that are often bland and lifeless … and that is not good journalism. An attractive package is desirable, but we should pay as much attention to the quality of the grey stuff as we do to its packaging."

Things haven't changed much in the past eight years; in fact the speed of redesigns has hotted up while circulations fall at a concurrent speed.

ColdType, resurrected after a hiatus of five years – it took nearly four years to persuade my former bosses at Thomson Newspapers to give me the title and another 15 months to decide what to do with it – will continue with its original mission: to reprint examples of excellent writing from around the world in a format that emphasises how a neat and unobtrusive design can enhance, without subsuming, the power of of The Word.

That's the mission, but the point, as always is much simpler: Great writing is wonderful and should be available to as many people as possible – and preferably free of charge, hence our new pdf format and internet distribution. I hope you find this new issue interesting, informative and amusing. If you do (or if you don't), let me know. Your feedback is important.

Tony Sutton
Editor

Special thanks to Ian Jack, Robert Fisk, Denis Beckett, Lesley Riddoch, Rian Malan, Michael I. Niman, Warren Gerard and Paul Duchene, writers of the stories in this issue; L.E. Baskow for his photo essay; and illustrators Rui Ramalheiro and Dušan Petricic.

PRINTING HINTS: ColdType is best read when printed to its full 11" by 14" proportions, but it can easily be read when reduced to 74% of its original on regular printers. Colour printing is best.

READERS' COMMENTS: Tell us what you think of this issue of ColdType – content, size, ease of reading, etc. and give us your suggestions for future issues. We also welcome article submissions, although we don’t pay for them. Comments to: tony@sutton@newsdesign.net.

NOTES ON THE TYPEFACES: This issue is the first publication to feature – heads and text – Goodchild, a new font designed by Toronto type designer Nick Shin (www.shinntype.com). The sans serif faces in ColdType are various weights of Brown, also designed by Shin.

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13. STILL LIFE: Living art. That’s the best phrase to describe what Wells Oviatt III does for a living. If you’re travelled through Portland recently, you’ve probably seen him – he’s the statue in the square. Photo essay by L.E. Baskow, words by Paul Duchene
As weather and broken railway lines brought Britain to a standstill at the end of 2000, Ian Jack boarded a train, gazed at the cows and wondered if the British had become thick.
Porters, if they are still called porters, came and cleared a way. Then we began to run down the platform. A voice over the Tannoy said we were not to run – it was dangerous, there would be room on other trains – but still we ran. Thick, as my old colleague might have said; after all, most of us had booked seats. Or perhaps not so thick, given the capricious booking arrangements. I had seat 38 in coach B, but the seats in coach B were ticketed for coach A. And, a thrilling double layer of confusion, the seat numbers on the tickets did not correspond to the numbers on the seats to which they were attached. Seat B40 had a ticket for A38, going only as far as York.

Somehow, we made do without too many arguments, remarking to each other as passengers do in a country such as India that no public system can be relied on, nothing bloody works.

The train left late and got later, three hours later than its original time, two later than its revised time. There were many apologies – this country has become brilliant at apologising. I was at my mother’s home by midnight. She is 93. “I wonder,” she said, “why trains have to travel so fast. A hundred miles an hour! That’s surely dangerous.”

On my way back, I thought about her question. The little train from Fife was late and crowded, standing room only. On board the nine o’clock to London at Edinburgh, we were advised to get off unless our journey was “really necessary” – shades of 1940 – because the train might get no further than Doncaster. At Newcastle, we were told it would advance no further than York. “Deteriorating,” or sometimes just “adverse,” weather conditions had cut off southern England from the north. At York, we got off, only to be told that the train would in fact go to London.

Back on, we were told it would go only to Doncaster. At Doncaster, we waited on a windy platform where pleasant officials of the Great North Eastern Railway company (the best of the new railway operators, in my experience, although perhaps I’ve been seduced by the olde-worlde hokum of the name) told us that they were as much in the dark as we were, but with any luck we could expect a train from Leeds. After an hour, one came along, nearly empty.

We reached London at half past five, a journey of eight and a half hours from Edinburgh rather than the advertised four. My mother would have approved, and the truth is that I didn’t mind too much.

A warm and empty carriage, work to do, some compensatory free coffee, and time to look at the cows. In 1910 – according to the Bradshaw of that year – the journey time would have been thought satisfactory. Even in the 1960s, the fastest trains took six hours and there were far fewer of them: five a day, slow or fast, from Edinburgh to London, whereas now there are more than twenty. Or would be, were it not for broken rails.

But pace my mother’s question, we think we live in a modern European country. We expect trains to travel fast, motorways to be clear, schools to educate, hospitals to care and cure, food to be safe. This is not so much rising as risen expectations. It may be no more than a brief illusion: this country is brilliant at illusions – new uniforms for the Underground, escalators that crack, stations that close. All of us, even the thickest, now know that the underfunded ice we skate on is very, very thin.

Ian Jack is editor of Granta, the international literary magazine.
Time was when I could conceive of no greater reward for a job done than a large G&T. The sort you pour yourself – bigger than the pub measure with an extra little kick. No better way of getting out of the dol- drums than a large dram – preferably an island malt, not cooking whisky.

No better way to spend an hour on the shuttle than to sample a wee bottle of wine – or two. Well, their little measures are so mean. No better way to enjoy the last episode of a favourite TV detective series than alone with a bottle of Chardonnay. No possible way to explore intimacy than over wine. No possible way to bond deeply with fellow human beings than with a drink in hand. And another one waiting.

Then on August 1, 2000, something changed and now I don’t drink any more. In fact, with a year’s ban for drink-driving in 1998, the penny should have dropped much earlier. The shock certainly forced a separation of drinking and driving but if anything that just increased drinking opportunities.

In the country area where I live nobody gave me lectures on the error of my ways – or even the dirty looks I expected and felt I deserved. At first I wondered if they knew I was only just over the limit and had scaled their reaction down accordingly. But if I had a dram for every person who said “it could have been me,” I’d be very ill.

Truth is, in Scotland 2002 you can drink or drive yourself to a virtual standstill without doing serious damage to your social standing or self esteem. In fact, in serious drinking quarters there is no upper limit.

Whatever southern sophisticates say about less being more, the Celts firmly believe more is more. We are out to have the ultimate experience. Scots, like the Irish, have an almost mystical belief in the possibility of self-discovery through drink. Any brave explorer is applauded – even if the journey occasionally ends at base camp. The real crime I’ve committed in the eyes of those big drinkers who have been and still are my best friends is to quit the quest and abandon the adventure by stopping drinking.

So what made me change? Well the aftermath of my turning 40 was probably a factor. I celebrated my birthday with a valiant party of friends who crossed the choppiest Minch in (my) living memory for a night of bacchanaelian excess on Eigg. I’ve spent most Hogmanays on the Hebridean island since becoming a trustee of their Heritage Trust seven years ago.

On June 12, 1997, when the community finally bought the island I was drinking and dispensing drams to all and sundry until the last head hit the kitchen table at Kildonan at about 11am. By 4pm we were all up again for more. And so it went on for several days – that is the Hebridean way. And I was proud that my staying power meant I could witness the music, dancing and patter right till the bitter end.

Looking forward to more of the same on my birthday, I arrived at the Eigg tearoom to be solemnly handed a birthday card by a couple of friends – aged 10. On the front a mini-skirted stickwoman stood legs astride with a whip in one hand – spelt wipe but I got the drift – and a bottle in the other. The caption: Be a party animal!

I insisted they had got me all wrong. “But you only ever come here for parties,” said young Cailean. “You never just come to see us.” And I realised it did look that way. Other people came to drink tea, ponder the ways of the universe and chat to people without a ceilidh for accompaniment. I always waited for an alcohol-related opportunity. Why?

It set me thinking. Would I even consider a night on the isle without a hospitable bottle of whisky to hand? How much were we all overlooking the downside of drink to keep the image of the incorrigible, dram-swilling but loveable highlander alive?

A new survey suggests that alcohol consumption by Brit- ish women is likely to soar by 30% by 2004. Does being a woman in the UK drive you to drink? asks Lesley Riddoch. Or is that just a lazy, outdated excuse for New Women aping Old Lads?

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SCOTLAND

It’s her shout!

A new survey suggests that alcohol consumption by British women is likely to soar by 30% by 2004. Does being a woman in the UK drive you to drink? asks Lesley Riddoch. Or is that just a lazy, outdated excuse for New Women aping Old Lads?
I started thinking but I kept drinking. Not massively. I don’t think I was or am an alcoholic. I could lay off when I wanted. Sometimes I would have a rule not to drink on my own. For almost a year I didn’t drink during the week. For a while I made sure there were at least two booze-free days a week. But a big social occasion followed by a piece of serious work would mean trying to reschedule work or skipping the gig rather than going but not drinking. I would take two or three bottles of wine when visiting friends – just in case – and they were always finished. I never bought the gadget that removes air from an opened bottle – wine didn’t stay around that long. I do now recall good friends having to make sure we met on Fridays – they always needed a day to recover.

I, on the other hand, felt no pain. When others were unable to move at 7am, I was up and functioning. Friends kept marvelling at my capacity for drink, and I did too, instead of wondering what real marvels might be in store if I wasn’t wasting time, brain cells and emotional energy through alcohol.

Did I get my thirst from my parents? No way. I saw my dad under the influence once in 35 years – even though he was brought up in the shadow of a distillery in rural Banffshire. Mum has had four sherries to my one.

But then thanks to her encouragement I had rather different opportunities and terrifying experiences to face in life. I am almost certainly the first female member of the family on either side to go to university. I was the first person from my school to go to Oxbridge and the first family member to leave home for England aged 18. I was the first female president of Oxford University Student Union – the first non-Conservative president at that. Thereafter, I was very often the only female at meetings, on boards, behind lecterns, on platforms and in the public eye. I thought I took it all in my stride, but I started dealing with the strain like lifting of the logical barriers that keep ideas separated and compartmentalised. I often had my best lateral thinking programmes – I believed – after a night out. While others were unable to move at 7am, I was up and functioning. Friends kept marvelling at my capacity for drink, and I did too, instead of wondering what real marvels might be in store if I wasn’t wasting time, brain cells and emotional energy through alcohol.

So what’s happened since the demon drink has stayed in the bottle? I’ve had a joined-up life and more energy and focus. Am I more measured in my alcohol consumption? I am. I have a drink and moan or dream along with the other de-motivated creative people in the bar/ceilidh/kitchen/party. So why do we drink? Here’s a little experiment: I made the No 1 question she gets asked is: “Which alcoholic drink has the fewest calories?” Another friend toyed with writing a book about the reality of breast cancer treatment entitled “Can I Still Drink?” – the question most women are too embarrassed to ask when the doctor talks them through chemotherapy.

Booze unquestionably encourages the dramatists amongst us to make emotional mountains out of molehills. What can we face is failure. And boredom. We cannot bear to manage the day-to-day problems that afflict everyone. We want excitement but we don’t want to plan for it. Far simpler to abdicate responsibility, set no goals, drift along, have a drink and moan or dream along with all the other de-motivated creative people in the bar/ceilidh/kitchen/party.

No one will live in the future. All has been said, unless words change their meanings and meanings their words.

Women’s bodies, even robust 5ft 11in ones like mine, cannot handle alcohol as well as men’s. It may not be fair but it is true. For every drug-related death in Scotland there are 10 alcohol-related ones. Women damage their livers far more through drink than men and the I’s wash in. An excess of brain damage. Drunk women put themselves more at risk of unprotected sex, as well as sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, rape – and certainly badly damaged self-esteem.

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And more late night trips as a chauffeur than serious work would mean trying to reschedule work or skipping the gig rather than going but not drinking. I would take two or three bottles of wine when visiting friends – just in case – and they were always finished. I never bought the gadget that removes air from an opened bottle – wine didn’t stay around that long. I do now recall good friends having to make sure we met on Fridays – they always needed a day to recover.
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Much of this vicious, threatening letters and openly violent statements that we journalists receive today, this was comparatively mild. For the internet seems to have turned those who do not like to hear the truth about the Middle East into a community of haters, sending venomous letters not only to myself but to any reporter who dares to criticise Israel – or American policy in the Middle East.

There was always, in the past, a limit to this hatred. Letters would be signed, with the writer’s address. Or if not, they would be so ill-written as to be illegible. Not any more. In 26 years in the Middle East, I have never read so many vile and intimidating messages addressed to me. Many now demand my death. And at the beginning of May, the Hollywood actor John Malkovich did just that, telling the Cambridge Union that he would like to shoot me.

How, I ask myself, did it come to this? Slowly but surely, the hate has turned to incitement, the incitement into death threats, the walls of propriety and legality gradually pulled down so that a reporter can be abused, his family defamed, his beating at the hands of an angry crowd greeted with
laughter and insults in the pages of an American newspaper, his life cheapened and made vulnerable by an actor who — without even saying why — says he wants to kill me.

Much of this disgusting nonsense comes from men and women who say they are defending Israel, although I have to say that I have never in my life received a rude or insulting letter from Israel itself. Israelis sometimes express their criticism of my reporting — and sometimes their praise — but they have never stooped to the filth and obscenities which I now receive.

“Your mother was Eichmann’s daughter,” was one of the most recent of these. My mother Peggy, who died after a long battle with Parkinson’s three-and-a-half years ago, was, in fact, an RAF radio repair operator on Spitfires at the height of the Battle of Britain in 1940.

The events of 11 September turned the hate mail white hot. That day, in an airliner high over the Atlantic that had just turned back from its routing to America, I wrote an article for The Independent, pointing out that there would be an attempt in the coming days to prevent anyone asking why the crimes against humanity in New York and Washington had occurred. Dictating my report from the aircraft’s satellite phone, I wrote about the history of deceit in the Middle East, the growing Arab anger at the deaths of thousands of Iraqi children under US-supported sanctions, and the continued occupation of Palestinian land in the West Bank and Gaza by America’s Israeli ally. I didn’t blame Israel. I suggested that Osama bin Laden was responsible.

But the e-mails that poured into The Independent over the next few days bordered on the inflammatory.

The attacks on America were caused by “hate itself, of precisely the obsessive and dehumanising kind that Fisk and Bin Laden have been spreading,” said a letter from a Professor Judea Pearl of UCLA. I was, he claimed, “doodling venom” and a professional “hate peddler.” Another missive, signed Ellen Popper, announced that I was “in cahoots with the arch-terrorist” Bin Laden. Mark Guon labeled me “a total nut-case.” I was “psychotic,” according to Lillie and Barry Weiss. Brandon Heller of San Diego informed me that “you are actually supporting evil itself.”

It got worse. On an Irish radio show, a Harvard professor — infuriated by my asking about the motives for the atrocities of 11 September — condemned me as a “liar” and a “dangerous man” and announced that “anti-Americanism” — whatever that is — was the same as anti-Semitism. Not only was it wicked to suggest that someone might have had reasons, however deranged, to commit the mass slaughter. It was even more appalling to suggest what these reasons might be. To criticise the United States was to be a Jew-hater, a racist, a Nazi.

And so it went on. In early December, I was almost killed by a crowd of Afghan refugees who were enraged by the recent slaughter of their relatives in American B-52 air-raids. I wrote an account of my beating, adding that I could not blame my attackers, that if I had suffered their grief, I would have done the same. There was no end to the abuse that came then.

In The Wall Street Journal, Mark Steyn wrote an article under a headline saying that a “multiculturalist” — me — had “got his due.” Cards arrived bearing the names of London “whipping” parlours. The Independent’s website received an e-mail suggesting that I was a paedophile. Among several vicious Christmas cards was one bearing the legend of London “whipping” parlours. The Independent’s website received an e-mail suggesting that I was a paedophile. Among several vicious Christmas cards was one bearing the legend of London “whipping” parlours.

Thus a disgusting remark by an actor in the Cambridge Union led to a website suggesting that others were even more eager to kill me. Malkovich was not questioned by the police. He might, I suppose, he refused any further visas to Britain until he explains or apologises for his vile remarks. But the damage has been done. As journalists, our lives are now forfeit to the internet haters. If we want a quiet life, we will just have to toe the line, stop criticising Israel or America. Or just stop writing altogether.

Robert Fisk is the award-winning Middle East correspondent for The Independent in London.
Shit, spit, squalor and lessons for all of us

The passing wheels keep you on your toes – and thank heaven for all those sober drivers – but there is no thought of attack, assault, guns, knives, boots, aggression in any guise whatever

After three days in India I had three things in mind: shit, spit and squalor, each in the dictionary definition. That India has squalor, everyone knows. But knowing it is only knowing it. Being in it makes the worst we have in South Africa look easy. In Mumbai we met the South African delegation to an International Homelessness Conference. The delegates, shack-dwellers, said repeatedly (a) “how is this possible? Our Indians are so organised,” and (b) “we never knew we were so lucky.”

The other two S-words, I was even less prepared for.

Spit: what got to me wasn’t so much the motion of a globule of gob scuttling into the dust; it was the sound effects. People hawk up gleu golfballs of phlegm with such energy that the uninitiated think they’re having seizures. Several times I was ready to catch a passer-by as he fell. But he’d regain equilibrium, calmly roll the wodge around his mouth, and expectorate. Mumbai newspaperers debated a new rule against spitting on the buses. A letter-writer said it was the people’s birthright. Another, that if they couldn’t spit on the floor they’d spit out the window, which from the top deck meant spitting blind onto innocent pates below.

The faces factor was more original. In many countries a degree of public spitting is common. The other thing, not so much. In South Africa the segment of the populace that contributes to the irrigation of concrete walls and tarred alleys draws the line at full-frontal cacation. (Yep, real word, from the Latin cacare.) In India it’s routine to glance around a busy place and find half a dozen men squatting in quiet contemplation, penis and scrotum dangling imperturbably before the world like turkey-neck and gizzards, steaming pile rising on the ground below.

I know we children of the millennium are supposed to be sensitive to other people’s customs, but this can be difficult when a squashed heap of human excrement has just flowed over your sandals and is squishing between your toes. As Musa Radebe the sound man said, if you don’t look for it all the time you step in it.

Mumbai has a nomenclature problem. The visitor politely applies the new non-colonial name and is startled that half the locals fiercely correct him: “Bombay!” He adjusts and is startled that half the locals fiercely correct him right back: “Mumbai!” He retreats to “the city,” but with his fingers crossed because he doesn’t truthfully see the city as a city, he sees it as a squatter camp with severe elephantiasis.

You can travel for hours through undifferentiated slumland. Pavements do not exist. Where they once were, are now endless human pigeon-holes, with sides, back, and open front. Unlike the industrial packaging and bits of road-sign better known in Africa, these units are concrete, or they wash away in the monsoon. But they’re catacombs. Middle-class Africans are pained that a squatter African family can live in a space the size of their kitchen. Squatter Africans, like the Homeless ladies, here felt pain that two Mumbai families live in a space the size of their kitchen. A family unit might be two-storey. Downstairs a ten-year-old can stand up straight. Upstairs, only a baby can sit up.

Washing, weeing, cooking and life takes place in the potholes outside. To walk down a street – if the process of dodging scooters, bicycles, rickshaws and 1960ish Fiats may be called “walking” – is to feel perpetually embarrassed at invading somebody’s bathroom. Naked children scrub brush teeth, dry, oblivious to the maelstrom and evading death by Fiat with unconscious deftness. The first day in India my heart stopped twenty times, at a hasty bumper bearing down upon a toddler with apparently inevitable results. By the end I’d adjusted to Indian life: a miss by millimetres is still a miss. So? The same miss in Johannesburg, never mind Stockholm, would leave both parties shaking.

Respite is depressingly absent. All of Mumbai is the same, a long chaotic sprawl. South or old Mumbai is supposedly classy Mumbai, but the class is back-handed – rundown colonial leftovers. Half a century of independence seems to have delivered the city nothing inspiring or impressive or even a momentary counterpoint to the morass; not as much as a shopping mall. Well, maybe the super-class district, Malaba Hill, is an exception. It’s a drab flatland, with pavements.

We left Mumbai without tears, for Varanasi – fierce correction “Benares!” – holiest of the holy cities of India. Varanasi is the place on the Ganges that people go to die, so as to short-cut the interim incarnations between this life and heaven. Its principal livelihood is waiting-to-die. Thousands of people are waiting to die, and vigorously importuning tourists to keep them alive until the wait is over. They are in competition with hawkers of anything batteries and cellphone kits to shrines and gods. Gods are available in every shape, size and material.

“With ears echoing to ‘only 100 rupees’ and ‘special price’ it becomes awkward to tune to the mystical side of affairs, but once we got on a boat and the din subsided a sense of the spiritualism began to make itself felt.

Men were bathing in the river. Given the sight and smell of the water, and the guide-book’s assertion that the e coli count was 250,000 times the safe limit, I took it they were keen to hasten the route to heaven.

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250,000 times the safe limit, I took it they were keen to hasten the route to heaven. In case they failed, their women did the laundry from the shores. On the banks dozens of sects engaged in prayers involving dramatic physical contortions.

At Varanasi I began to see a plus side to India, though overlain by the Three S’s. Moreover our Prof had placed us in the most off-putting hotel I have ever known (which, since I’d rather stay where locals stay than stay where tariffs are in dollars, is saying a lot). If I’d left India after two days of Mumbai and one of Varanasi, I’d have left feeling solely an almighty relief to be leaving. That thing nearly happened. Next stop was Delhi, where our connection had checked us into a youth hostel (I imagined them expelling me for false pretences, but the manager laughed: “you can be young at 100 if you want to.”) I called home and found that two of my children had been hospitalised from two mishaps, one fairly dire. I was for instant return, but Superwife insisted that no-one was dying, I should run the course. (Next day her mother was under the surgeon’s knife too, and the day after, one of our dogs – more operations in half a week than in the preceding quarter century.)

Despite a suspicion that the cosmic order was sending me a message, I stuck it out and learned that there’s more to India than the S’s. Delhi for a start was an antidote to Mumbai. New Delhi is spectacular, if not that new. Its pride of place is Raj Path, with the old Viceroyal – now Presidential – palace as its anchor. Under the last Viceroy the palace famously maintained a domestic staff of 1,000, of whom 60 chased crows off the lawns. Current employment figures were not available but are presumably not much different, given India’s employment habits.

Retrenchment mania hasn’t got here yet. Factories look like refugees from DH Lawrence – teeming hordes of manual workers and giant black clouds spraying carpets of soot. Health & Safety regulations are science fiction. Status comes from how many people you employ, not how many you cut off the payroll. Everyone has an assistant or five – taxi drivers have assistants, porters have assistants, assistants have assistants. Many jobs, pathetic pay. I accompany a girl to school, by rickshaw. A mile trip for five rupees, a US dime. In Durban, rickshawmen are protected from such exploitation. They make fifty times as much for giving a tourist a jaunt down the esplanade. But Durban’s rickshaws are down to twenty and its jobless is up to half a million. Delhi has half a million rickshaws. 500,000 x 10c = $50,000. 20 x
$5 = $100. The girl's rickshaw driver has a career. He provides a service, which to the girl's father is satisfactory – you never wait more than a minute for a passing rickshaw; she does her homework as she rides; robbery or danger does not enter the equation.

The Taj Mahal is three hours from Delhi in a lusty 4x4 with a double-dose of 4x4 arrogance: if vehicle ahead failed to notice our hooter, we nudged him with our bumper. Had we passengers been ECG-wired there would have been peaks on the graph.

Everybody had said that the Taj is indescribably bigger and better in real life than in reputation, and I was surprised to agree. European tourist palaces tend to be tacky close up, with furniture glued up and chandelier bulbs missing. The Taj is nothing but marble. There are no accoutrements to wear out. In the pattern of grandeur it has a bloody history, with craftsmen press-ganged to build it and rewarded by having digits amputated to thwart rival tomb-builders.

The original cause was a monsoon, about which I, not being an American tourist, would have been peaks on the graph. Had we passengers been ECG-wired there would have been peaks on the graph.

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It may not have been fun to live under Shah Jahan, who commissioned the Taj when his wife died giving birth to her 14th child, but he did subsequent generations a favour. Four centuries later they have an immense focus of Indian pride and prestige, as well as continuing income. If kinder and gentler contemporaries put effort into health and education and community uplift then they did not score total success. The average Indian peasant ploughs the same paddy fields standing on the same sled-like contraption drawn by the same oxen as his forebears have been using for a millennium.

Is that a lesson? I don't mean slave labour and backed lines but the principle of going for gold, as it were. If an impoverished society puts all its energy into filling bottomless pits, the pits stay bottomless. Creating things that inspire or ennable – and are slammed as elitist or extravagant – may do more for the people than for the proprietor. (The Taj did not do much for Jahan's career. He died in jail, imprisoned by his son.)

The Taj entrance fee was 5 rupees – for Indians. For foreigners, 505 rupees. Four of those knocked a hole in the wallet. Still, I persuaded myself, that was right. Tough on backpackers trying to see India as the Indians see it, and tough on South Africans translating their ravaged lands via dollars back to the as-ravaged rupee. But in principle there was something just.

Next day we got into an airplane tangle. The original cause was a monsoon, about which I, not being an American tourist, couldn't complain. However the original cause became compounded by what eventually, 15 hours later, the captain cheerfully described over the intercom as “a lot of bungles and slip-ups.”

We sought an alternative flight. The first option was Indian Airlines, at whose hands 100 people had been killed two days earlier. [In a crash that bypassed the western media, which go ballistic about crashes in the west.] The ground-staff person offered solace: “We only have a crash once a year so you'll be fine.” Sublime logic but not wholly reassuring. Seat-belted and ready to go, the Indian Airlines flight was cancelled, surprising no one but us. Option two was Jet Airlines.

“Sure,” said the Jet lady, “three hundred dollars, please.” An Indian guy we'd befriended blew up. “What? For four? It’s thirty dollars a seat!” She replied coldly, “for you it’s thirty dollars. These people are foreigners.” I re-mulled my formerly phlegmatic tolerance of discriminating against foreigners, particularly since “foreign” clearly meant “white.” She saw whites and slapped 150% onto the fare. Clearly, too, we weren't meant to know. Our Indian ally bollocked her for racism but she stood her ground – it was policy, that was the law – and then broke into Hindi to bollocks him back for betraying trade secrets to us. I should have had some man, Zulu Musa, buy the tickets.

In the end that flight also didn't happen. We arrived at Udaipur on the original plane, a day out of time but worth it to hear the captain's 'bungles and slip-ups' candour.

Worth it, too, to have hung on in. By now Bombay memory was several days old and the nostrils were clear. I was becoming gripped by other sides of India. Like ingestion. The average Indian eating house offers neither meat nor liquor, so the average African adult male experiences blind panic upon arrival. Thirty minutes later he's apt to change his tune. An Indian veg-and-lassi dinner is as delicious and filling as anything that comes from butcher shop or bottle store, and much kinder on the liver. Plus there is a profound relief in a virtually drunk-free night-life.

To say nothing of violence-free. There is a solid quota of ethnic and religious barbarities, along with India's speciality, caste barbarities, but walking the streets of an Indian city, Mumbai included, is peculiarly liberating. The passing wheels keep you on your toes – and thank heaven for all those sober drivers – but there is no thought of attack, assault, guns, knives, aggression in any guise whatever.

In Udaipur we took on a concentrated dose of another thing – majesty. A British immigrant put it nicely, “With respect.” He said, very correct, like a lawyer about to zap you, “with respect, as I ride my bicycle to work every day I pass a dozen castles, tombs and palaces, any one of which, if you had it in South Africa, would be your most famous national treasure. Here, they don't even have names.”

Back at Mumbai airport for the Jo'burg flight the departure hall was thick with South African businessmen, plugging in to the opening of India's economy like they're doing to Africa's economies. In one lobe I was proud of them and the way they are making us as a hub of Third-World commerce. In another lobe I shuddered at all the dollar-a-day spade-wielders who are heading for retrenchment under the onslaught of globalism. But the main lobe revolved at my compatriots (of diverse complexities) who ridiculed and derided everything Indian. A few days earlier I might have kept my lip zipped. Now I argued that it wasn't one-way; we had to see beyond the easy three S's to the subtler arenas where India gave us a model. They thought I'd been smoking something strange.

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