

March 2008 – India

Maharashtra and Gujarat

Monday, 3rd March

As I have an overnight flight to Mumbai, it's a leisurely start. Derek has agreed to act as taxi driver and he comes over mid afternoon. After a last minute check and a cup of tea, we set off for Slough. As always, I'm glad to have done all the checks and to have made the final departure. It's three and half weeks, but of course the luggage is very limited, just one medium rucksack and a small case that I plan to leave in Bombay with flight things and clean clothes for return. It's small enough to take on board as a cabin bag.

Derek's *trinkgeld* is a meal of his choice which is at the Toby carvery on the way to the airport; before that we go to The Glen for tea and biscuits. To allow for problems, I've got plenty of time. It also makes the timing better for Derek who can get back home reasonably early. The meal is as usual with plenty of temptation to overeat.

I had done the check-in on line and selected seat and meal and printed a boarding card. The queues at Terminal Fy and our are quite short and bag drop and security are quickly over leaving hours before the flight is called and departs. Given that there will be a meal on the plane and having visited the carvery, eating isn't a way to fill the time but I have plenty of books and puzzles and the time passes agreeably enough with the occasional walk around to look at what's going on.

The BA flight is quite comfortable but full and therefore I can't swap seats to one where the overhead light works. So much for reading in flight. My preordered Asian Vegetarian meal is fine but as a lot of passengers on this flight want it, there's no time advantage in it. The Trolley Dolly encourages me in my drinking. I ask for wine plus G and T; she says why not have two and so there are supplies for the hotel in Bombay.

Tuesday, 4th March

The flight is uneventful and reaches Bombay at 11.30. There is a long walk to the terminal and the usual tense wait for the bag. It's obvious that the terminal hasn't been upgraded as the domestic terminal that I used last December had. It's still what I remember of Indian airports of ten years ago, very grubby and shabby. Immigration seems to take less time than it used to and I'm soon in a taxi to the city – 300/= to the Suba Palace with the ticket from the booking desk. Bombay now seems very familiar and I enjoy the ride into town hugely. It's also good to get back to the hotel which seems to have been refurbished and seems quite smart. SD have booked me a room for tonight and the return last night. It's a double, quite small but relatively expensive for India at £48 with breakfast. The reception agrees to keep my small bag while I'm away.

As usual I get out for a walk as soon as possible in the warm, humid sunshine. As always, it's to the Gateway to India and along the coast towards the headland. Soon I'm drawn to the cash

machines, but it's the same story as last Autumn, no joy at several and a branch can't help me. I change £100 for 77/= commission and decide I'll have to use credit cards as much as possible. At least I've brought more cash and travellers' cheques than last time. After the hassle in the heat it's good to get back for a shower. Staying for a night is much better than getting a train the same day. Several nights would be even better with lots to see.

The Trishna calls. This is the restaurant recommended in London at the Veeraswamy by the chefs, all trained in Bombay. It certainly deserves repeated visits, and doesn't disappoint. The Pomfret with black pepper is excellent but with Naan, Dhal and lime soda costs 700/=. I think that most people who visit pay a lot more. The smells and noises of the night time city are attractive but a good night's sleep beckons after the overnight flight. And it is a good night. The room is surprisingly quiet for the centre of the city.

Wednesday, 5th March

It's an early start to get the Deccan express for a good connection to Matheran. Up at 5.20 and tea and toast in the room as it's far too early for breakfast. There's a problem about leaving my case but when I say that it was agreed yesterday they accept it. Later I find that the ticket specifies a daily charge and a maximum fortnight deposit. There turns out to be no problem on return.

A half hour walk gets me to VT in good time for the train which is the 7.10 departure for Neral. The streets are largely quiet but there are plenty of passengers at the station both commuters and long distance travellers, many of whom are sleeping on the floor for their early departures.

My train has air condition chair class coaches, grubby but comfortable. The few people on board at departure changes at subsequent Bombay stations and the ride to Neral is comfortable with a punctual arrival and the narrow gauge train to Matheran is waiting over the bridge. The queues for tickets are long and I bless SD for getting my advance first class reservation with a compartment across the train to myself, which is useful as the compartment has no room for luggage and I don't want to use the baggage car. The travelling ticket collector complains that I have no reservation chit but a bit of bluster about the number of times I've travelled without (including today on the main line) and the lack of time to collect it in Bombay satisfy him. There is a British couple in the next compartment who enjoy the discussion.

The ride to Matheran is a joy. Shorter than most of the toy train rides at about two hours but every moment is full of interest and views. Initially it's alongside the main line and the engine sheds with a steam locomotive that appears to be still ready for service but soon we branch off through low hills using each brow to gain some height. The route seems very well planned and affords views of lineside life. There are a few stops for new passengers but the vast majority are travelling the whole line; indeed finding room in second class after the beginning looks problematical.

From these low hills there is a view of the cliffs to come. The impression is of an island surrounded by dry land (and that is underlined from the top) and the train starts winding anti clockwise across and up the cliff side in a dramatic manner. Soon there is a rest stop with the usual hawkers; I sometimes wish that I were brave enough to eat their foods. Then it's off again

on the slow cliff crawl. On the right hand side there's a huge view over the plains and more immediately very steeply down to rocky jumble with sparse vegetation. The legend in the compartment is 'For your safety keep windows open during storms otherwise bogies may get thrown'.

After doing a 180° loop around the cliff giving yet more views and a stop at the car park the arrival into Matheran is on time before 11. There is a capitation fee of 25 rupees on leaving the station. The whole of the town is traffic free with cars limited to the car park over a mile from the station. In the centre there are plenty of horses to ride but the distances are easy to cover on foot, but walking through deep red dust which stains everything.

I have no hotel booked but did send an email to Lord's Central Hotel and was told to contact them about single occupancy but I got no reply then. When I get to the hotel there is a room available at a very good rate 1050/= for full board plus afternoon and bed tea. Luckily it's midweek or the rate would be 3000. The food turns out to be good and the room reasonable but nothing special. I could have had a better room but as they don't take credit cards it seemed better to economise. I used the dollars I had to cover some of the bill; it would have been better to keep them though to pay entry fees as the rate was older and better!

After a shower lunch calls. It's a pleasant change to have all meals included; no decisions and economical. The food is good. Initially they have forgotten that I asked for vegetarian food. No problem, but the veg options take longer to arrive so that I think that I'm going to get a limited offer but eventually there's lots of interesting dishes, with similar styles for lunch and dinner but plenty of variety in the dishes. The first lunch is veg cutlet, soup, 3 veg dishes, rice, salad, chapattis and sweet.

The two people, Michael and Patricia, that I met on the train are staying for one night and I have meals with them. Later I meet them on the terrace for tea and monkey business where I rashly fight off the monkeys and get worried about being scratched. Luckily I'm not. They have had the animals in their room and the staff worked hard with catapults to get rid of them. Patricia asked for my email and eventually sent an email to offer me a copy of the DVD they were making; I picked up the email in southern Germany. The disc turned out to be entertaining.

Meanwhile I spent the afternoon walking to Garbut Point, initially along the railway line and then through the 'jungle'. The hotel supplied a useful sketch map; obviously walking is a favourite occupation. There is a lot of laterite and hence the red dust. The walking is easy with good views and the weather around 30° and sunny. The trees give welcome shade and the impression gained on the train is justified. It's like walking on an island surrounded by cliffs falling away to the plains. The atmosphere is hazy but the views decent.

After tea with the monkeys and a shower it's soon time to have dinner which is leisurely from 8 to 9.30. The room has a fan but no air conditioning and this leads to a poor disturbed night.

Thursday, 6th March

After the disturbed night a walk in the dawn at 6.30 is very peaceful. There are not many people

around but plenty of dogs and monkeys around. As always this is wonderful time of day in India with a fresh breeze before the sun rises through the haze. It is a pity that the visibility isn't better but there is enough to see and it is atmospheric. At the hotel morning tea arrives at the room's terrace with biscuits and then to breakfast after a welcome shower. Breakfast is nothing special – instant coffee, toast and jam, but some semolina and a masala omelette enliven things.

The day is very relaxing centred around tea on the terrace and meals, similar to yesterdays'. Reading is interspersed with walks. The morning walk appropriately is to Monkey Point with the now predictable atmospheric views through the haze. The immediate scenery with its steep cliffs however makes up for the lack of distinction. A visit to the barbers at 40 rupees rounds off the morning before another excellent lunch. Michael and Patricia are departing for Bombay to continue their tour, with some recommendations for eating places. Their comment is that I wasn't robbed at the barbers.

The afternoon follows the same pattern, reading, walking, eating and lack of sleep.

Friday, 7th March

It is another relaxing day with the same routine. I'm getting to like this and rather like the idea of staying longer; it's like being on holiday.

The excitement of the morning's walk is the meeting with the snake. It slithers along the side of the wide track and disappears into the jungle perhaps on hearing me. Some local people respond to my asking about it with the word Darmen which I take to be its type. This is proved to be the case when I talk to the hotel proprietor. Darmen is the local name of the venomous snake. He rings various people to find the English name, He decides that it is a viper.

The afternoon sees a walk to Panorama Point with rather better visibility rewarding the longish walk. The last part of the walk is along a narrowish ridge with views all around. Below is the railway line and on cue a train rounds the bend as if posing for a photograph.

Back at the hotel the hotel bill is paid, largely in dollars, and conversation ensues. The older man is the uncle of the boss, the young man who answered my emails. Apparently he uses his laptop when in Bombay; hence the delay to a reply to my last email. He also seems to set the policies, for example the rate for which foreign currencies are accepted. The older man shows me pictures of the area at different seasons. September after the monsoon seems a good time with plenty of clouds rolling around but much better visibility. The hotel is closed in July and August during the monsoon and offers substantial discounts, especially for single occupancy, during the off season mid weeks.

Yet another good dinner is followed by packing and preparing for another early departure.

Saturday, 8th March

A long day starts with a wake up call, tea and omelette sandwiches at 5.45 eaten on the terrace in the pre dawn cool. A packed lunch accompanies me on the short walk to the station with lots of

time to spare for the departure to Neral at seven. As always there are plenty of diversions to watch; monkeys and children going to school feature strongly.

The train is not full but has a fair number on board but again I have a first class compartment to myself. This is particularly useful as the visibility is better and the views start on the right and move to the left lower down the line.

Neral is a pleasant small town but a short walk soon exhausts its sights and so most of the time between the trains is spent on the platform reading. After an hour and three quarters the Chair Class train arrives on time from Bombay. As usual it is full but plenty of people get off at the various stops on the journey to Pune. It proves to be a comfortable trip but views are limited to the side of the train where I manage to get a seat.

Pune is hot and crowded and the rest of the day doesn't live up to journey so far. First job after depositing my rucksack in the left luggage is to find a small rucksack/shoulder bag for use around town. A shop near the station yields one for 100/= and then the next job is lunch at a small place I used last time here, but it doesn't seem as attractive as I remember it, although the Dhosa is tasty. A rather tedious afternoon walking around the town ensues. The park for a restful reading session doesn't open until 4.30pm and the museum has disappeared but an internet café fills an hour. Cash still proves a problem and after the park two restaurants recommended in the guide book so no longer to exist. So it's back to the Woodlands Hotel where I stayed and even this is duller and drearier than I remember. All in all it's good to be back at the station with luggage collected and on to the overnight train to Manmad, via the waiting room. The train arrives early at about 11pm.

Sunday, 9th March

The journey is reasonably comfortable but there is not a lot of sleep with the snoring above. The arrival is early at 5.50 in the dark with a power cut at the station and the surrounding area. I expected a poor connection to Aurangabad, but the train isn't to 11 so it's off to the bus stand. It's difficult to find in the dark, but a rickshaw driver who is already engaged offers to take me for 5 rupees and I arrive at 6.15. There is a bus to Yeola at 6.25 and I am befriended by a student from Mumbai who is also heading for Aurangabad. At Yeola there is a bus to Aurangabad after a wait of half an hour, time enough for tea. Arrival is about 10am, an ideal time for finding accommodation. I'd tried to phone ahead but got no reply from the two hotels.

No wonder as there are just holes in the ground where they were. I don't like the look of another and a friendly rickshaw driver takes me to look at a recommended guest house about 4km from the centre. It's full and I decide not to go further to a friend of the driver and decide to try the nearby five star Ambassador Ajanta hotel. They can offer me a suite which they'll reduce to 5000/= including breakfast with the possibility of something cheaper for the second night. The room is very good and spacious and lunch in the restaurant is tasty although the bottle of beer in the heat of the day is a mistake. Rather than going sightseeing I sit in the garden reading and a short walk to the nearby local shops for provisions. An attempt to reserve a room in Jalgaon fails; but then most rooms are unbooked and I'm not really worried. Early to bed at 8pm with 50mg

Nytol so plenty of sleep, awaking twice but back to sleep until 6.15.

Monday, 10th March

The morning seems much better after the long sleep. Breakfast is nothing special and I leave the hotel at 7.45. The first rickshaw driver takes me to the wrong bus stand in spite of me telling him he's going the wrong way. He argues when I refuse to pay and get another man to take me into town to the central bus stand for 50 rupees.

The guide is right about the bus stand number eight and there's a bus at 8.30 and it takes about an hour to the caves at Ellora. It's an interesting ride through the countryside. The entry fee is 250/=, the site spread out and there is a lot to see, somewhat similar to Petra without the Siq. I forgot the torch but it really doesn't matter; most of the temples are fairly shallow and have lights. They range from simple to very ornate and various religions.

The weather is hot but mostly overcast so a hurried soda with the postcards is welcome. A bus to Daulatabad fort comes along soon. The entry is another 100 rupees (or it could have been \$2) and is well worthwhile. There is a stiff 250m climb to the summit of the hill with many steps, some in darkness. The camera battery runs out but I manage to snatch a few shots by resting it. It is an interesting site with wide views over the rather grey and hazy countryside. There are plenty of defences and a mosque, all in pretty good condition.

Buying a drink by the roadside means I miss the first bus, and the next one is a non-stop 'super fast'. However there is a stopping bus in ten minutes, and I get a rickshaw back to the hotel, having bartered down from 60 to 40 rupees.

The evening is spent with food from the room service menu and reading and to bed at 9.30 for a reasonable night.

Tuesday 11th March

Another early start to enable me to leave the hotel at 7.30, but not before a good breakfast with porridge on special order, for an auto back to the central bus stand. The latter is the usual noisy confusing place, but there is a bus to Ajanta at eight and all goes smoothly.

The ride is very pleasant through farm land which gradually gets rougher and rockier as Ajanta is neared. It is about 100km in two and half hours for 68 rupees and the buses the entry to the Ajanta complex, which is about 4km from the caves. There are shops and gardens and the weather is windy and hot. Entry is 250/=, bag deposit is 4, facilities tax 7 and 12 for the air condition bus to the caves. Why can't there be an inclusive charge?

After the bus ride there still is a stiff climb to the caves, but I pass on a 400 rupee Dhoolie ride. The caves are much closer together and more orderly than at Ellora. There are more or less on the level half way up a horse-shoe cliff around a bend in the river in this stunning location with two dry waterfalls. There seems to more decoration with a lot of frescos and Buddhas. Some of the temples are on two or three levels and the climbing can be rather delicate. After a good

exploration, there is a pleasant walk down to the dry river bed and back along the other bank. A quiet place to sit and look at the site is spoiled by the inevitable hawkers who descend immediately and seem inured to the word no. Then it's back to the shuttle bus to the cross roads.

The sun is hot and the wait for the bus is quite long. There are plenty of buses that are not going to Jalgaon but eventually one arrives which is predictably very full. However plenty get off at the next village during a long pause and the rest of the two hour journey is interesting as the initially arid countryside gets to be better farming land with a lot of cotton growing here.

Jalgaon is hot and dusty and not a particularly tourist sort of place but the Tourist Resoart (sic) Hotel has an A/C room for 750 rupees which is basic but acceptable. I have tea from room service in a splendid china teapot before going out to explore.

The station (for tomorrow) is five minutes away as are the recommended restaurants. My choice of cashew nut curry, Tarka dal, rice and rotis is very tasty and satisfying. A walk around the town is interesting and a cyber café occupies an hour before returning to the hotel for the night. The AC has failed but it is fixed within an hour and returns at ten for another reasonable night.

Wednesday, 12th March

Up at 7.30 and enjoy breakfast (brought in from a restaurant) in the room with excellent hot chocolate jam/toast, potato puri and puri bhaji. There is plenty and the remains form an acceptable snack for the train.

The short walk in the fresh morning is relaxed for the 930 train to Ahmadabad. It has come from Chennai but is spot on time. It's good to have a day train and to watch the countryside going by from the rather slow train – single track with work on the line. The route joins the main line from Bombay at Surat and the train is much faster and arrives at Ahmadabad just ten minutes late.

There are a few hours before the night train Veravale so I leave my bag at the station and head off to the Chetna reataurant. I thought I knew the way, but the dark and crowded streets make it hard to find the way; perhaps I should have taken an auto. However I am rewarded by a tasty masala dosa and get back to the station with an auto in time for the 9.45 train.

Thursday, 13th March

It was a peaceful, restful journey with a decent sleep and an early arrival at 6am. A German, Hans, from the train joins me for the walk to the centre and the bus stand where morning tea and biscuits are welcome. The bus for Diu is due at 7.30 and it arrives and then and sets off for the three hour journey. The bus is one of the most derelict I've seen and the road the worst; welcome to Gujarat. The slow bumpy ride gives plenty of time to view the interesting scenery with plenty of farmland.

At Diu there is a short walk to the Hotel Samrat which has an AC room for 900 rupees (non AC for 400). I had tried to contact a homestay recommended by Sawray but the telephone number wasn't answered. Later I met others who had tried to find it with no success. The room is

reasonable with a small balcony overlooking the kitchen yard. The TV has plenty of satellite channels. After a rest and shower I use the hotel restaurant for a very mediocre lunch and then out to explore, including looking for a better place to eat.

The road towards the fort is pleasant with colonial buildings and views towards mainland Gujarat. Eventually there is a waterside port to walk through and has views across the channel including an off shore fort.

The main fort is interesting, mainly well preserved and free. The afternoon is hot and sunny and any shade the fort offers is welcome. The annoying youngsters form the only drawback. There is a chapel dedicated to San Tiago; I assume that it means Sant Iago and lots of cannon pointing towards the ocean.

Out of the fort I explore the moat area and the country down towards the open sea. The area is undeveloped with a clear area between the fort and town. I am surprised to find a limestone pavement which takes me back to the Yorkshire Dales; only the plants are different. The cliffs are low and nearby is an old Portuguese walled cemetery with a shady seat suitable for restful reading. Soon I make my way back through the town. There are three churches, lots of colonial houses and some interesting new ones. The area seems prosperous and well looked after. Only the centre has the dirty feeling of an Indian town. Perhaps it's not surprising that the feeling is similar to Goa. Indeed a restaurant I find by following advertising posters is like a garden restaurant there. It's called O'Coquero and a snack of banana pancakes and tea convinces me that I should return for more meals. The owner is friendly and stops for a chat. He comes from Utteranchal where he finds little scope for the tourism and has definite views on health and hygiene.

Then it is back to the hotel for and early night and a good rest catching up from the night on the train.

Friday, 14th March

After a shower a short walk takes me back to O'Coquero for breakfast which I enjoy hugely. 160 rupees gets me muesli with hot milk, fruit salad, cheese and tomato toast and excellent coffee. Better than recent breakfasts! In the town centre I have various chores – shopping for snacks and a visit to the bank where I can change cash at 80.30 in spite of the guide book saying that change is difficult. The bank is very efficient and quick.

I spend most of the rest of the day in a walk along the coast to the east. The way is interesting and varied with parts along the beach, cliff and road. The only drawback is that there is little shade from the hot sun. It takes about two and a half hours to Nagora, a small resort with a couple of hotels and stalls. I go further along the coast and loop back through a village surrounded by farming and lush vegetation and some useful shade. At the sea facing restaurant a cold beer is welcome. There is no bus until six o'clock so I pick up an auto back into town; it takes 20 minutes and costs 50/=.

I cool down with a shower in the hotel and then go to the museum in a de-consecrated church

which has several wooden artifacts from the church. The it's back to the restaurant where pasta with aubergines followed by hot chocolate is enjoyable but not outstanding.

By now it is dark and a walk past the floodlit churches is interesting, as are the two forts which are extravagantly and colourfully illuminated.

Saturday, 15th March

After another good night I'm up at six thirty and after a short walk I repeat yesterday's breakfast and enjoy it just as much. Afterwards I visit the bus station to check the details for tomorrow. There are some very early departures and I may change my plans. There is no bus to Nagoa until eleven and so it's an auto again.

I continue my walk along the coast and it is just as enjoyable at just under two hours to Vanakbara which is at the eastern point of the island and facing towards the mainland across the strait. The village is friendly and extensive with plenty of fishing boats and boat building. The hot walk justifies two Limcas at a shady bar. A walk past the edge of the village takes me to the salt marsh with lots of birds to look at. From the bus stand there is a minibus back to Diu at one. There are lots from here at 5 Rs and twenty minute; only a few go via Nagoa. I get back for a late lunch at O'Q and then a rest. The early evening is spent in visiting the churches. One is closed but the museum and the other are open. The preparations are going on for tomorrow which is Palm Sunday. After a last look around I go back to the hotel for packing, to collect laundry and to pay the bill and an early night.

Sunday, 16th March

After a disturbed night I'm up at 4.45 and after a shower I get to the bus stand at 5.35. Either I or they made a mistake yesterday and there is no bus to Porbander until seven. I decide to take the six am to Gondal which costs 81Rs for the 187km. The ticket is printed by a hand held computer powered machine. Gujarat certainly seems more advanced than many areas of India. The ride is very pleasant. Initially the route is back to the mainland and to the town of Una and then into the countryside and into the National Park of Sason Gir. And the bus is more comfortable and the roads better than the arrival into Diu.

The arrival into Gondal is at 11.45 and since there is no map in the guide I take a very short auto ride to the Orchard Palace Hotel, a guest house for the Maharajah. A very large bed sitting room, dressing room and bath room is mine for 2680/= with full board. The room is very comfortable with access to the common balcony but very warm and the AC struggles with the large volume.

I have a good lunch at one and order dinner for seven thirty. I get a conducted tour of the railway coach standing in the grounds (which is available for hire overnight) and the car museum. After a rest I go to the riverside palace on foot. The directions are not completely sound and I see plenty of the town before getting there. They are expecting me and I get a conducted tour of the beautifully carved building which houses plenty of royal photographs and artefacts.

The town is mildly interesting but hot and dry and the river is receding. The place is not a tourist

trap and it proves difficult to find bottled water to buy. Back at the hotel reading on the large balcony is a good way to pass the time until the insects arrive and tell me it is time for a bath and dinner. It is a good meal carefully served and with an exquisite sweet tasting of rose water and saffron. I go for an early night to make up for last night but worry that it is too warm. But remarkably I get ten hours sleep with only brief intervals.

Monday, 17th March

Sunrise is late here; after seven as it is so far west. Before breakfast the balcony is a comfortable place for reading. Plenty of insects met their end on the lamps; there is quite a pile underneath them.

Breakfast is at eight with good porridge that I had asked for, bananas, chickoes, toast, instant coffee and cheese omelette. I pay the bill and leave a tip for the excellent service and retire to the balcony for more reading before leaving at 10.30 when I take some last minute photos and take the short walk to the bus stand. No English is spoken but I make known where I want to go and after fifteen minutes there is a bus to Junagadh. It is comfortable and fast along a road which is initially motorway in style. An hour and forty minutes, 70km and 42 Rs later I am in the hot and dusty bus stand at Junagadh. An auto for 15/= takes me to the Kalva Chouk and the Paramount Hotel has an AC room for me at 550/=. The AC works vaguely, but this cheaper room seems quieter than the one upstairs with a view. The manager(?) is very pleasant and shows me the way to the Sagar restaurant, which is a bit dim but the food is OK.

After lunch I go exploring the city, but initially change a £50 travellers cheque for a good rate but the process is very long-winded and frustrating. The town has a lot of decaying buildings but some of them are handsome. Just above the centre is the citadel which is extensive and interesting. There are good views over the town and hills including what I take to be the temple Girnal Hill waiting for my visit tomorrow. The site has various wells including a step well, gardens, tanks, battlements and a rather special Buddhist cave monastery. The gardens are a pleasant place to sit and relax.

After a return to the hotel a visit to a cyber café costs 10Rs for an hour and I finish the day off with a snack from room service of cheese toast and Bournvita. I have a decent night in spite of the 28° temperature.

Tuesday, 18th March

Up at 6.30 for a breakfast from room service of cornflakes with hot milk, 2 x coffee, toast with butter and jam and out at 7.15 for an auto to Taleti at 30/=. It is good to be out early and there is a cool breeze accompanying me for the 20 minutes drive.

The walk starts at 7.35 immediately on steps like those up Tai Shan in China, although here there is no entry charge. On the basis of progress and the guide book's 6000 steps the climb will take four hours; as it is, the number of steps is more like 6000 and the ascent takes about two and a quarter hours. I later think that the Guide book is including steps to a further temple complex

along the ridge which needs a descent and re-ascent that I don't follow.

There are plenty of dhoolies around which of course I spurn. The initial stage is gentle and through the forest. Gradually the gradient increases and there is a very steep stage across the cliff face, where there are good steps and a guard wall and no feeling of exposure. All the while the views are good and increasing in scope. The early morning air is quite clear but soon the haze develops.

As the gradient eases the first and largest group of temples appears. Many are brightly coloured and some are being renovated. Then there is a steep, exposed section of steps to the summit with a welcome wind. The view again is good, not too hazy, although the immediate scenery is best with volcanic plugs, temples and the city. After exploring and plenty of photographs I make a very gentle descent with a lot of stops, reaching the bottom at 12.45. The walk back to town is rather warm but interesting with a visit to the Ashokan Edicts which is a rip off at 100Rs with little to see and painting and renovation going on.

Back at the hotel, the manager(?) greets me and invites me to sit down and talk in the lobby. He serenades me with Andy Williams and Perry Como songs. Again he promises to check the bus times for me. He sends off a boy to get my shoes stitched for 5 Rs. Eventually I escape to a shower and a rest.

At five pm I go out for a walk around, Masala Paper Dosa at the Sagar and a visit to the Internet Café and return to find my laundry waiting. After a period reading I make an early and decent night.

Wednesday, 19th March

As I haven't got information about buses to Palitana, I'm up early at 5.30, with breakfast in the room at six, pay the bill of 1400/= and farewell at 6.40. An auto takes me to the bus stand where I get various advice, but eventually find a woman who is getting the bus I want, which leaves at 7.10 to Bhavanagar and I need to get to Songadh for 84Rs for about 180km. My friendly helper is getting off for her work but introduces me to a family on the bus that are also going to Palitana and will show me where to get off and how to get the connection.

Initially the journey is interesting, travelling around the SW edge of the hills which have clouds on them and there is a pleasant cool wind. Before long however the countryside settles down to the more normal arable scenery with fairly well separated towns. Each of these has a bus stand where we stop for about ten minutes each.

At about 12.30 we reach Songadh where there is a shared rickshaw which is crammed with people and luggage. This means that the view is in only one direction, but the countryside is interesting, hilly and arid. About forty minutes and 15Rs later Palitana, a hot and dusty town is reached. A policeman says that there is no tourist office, but I find the bus stand and having oriented myself, the guide book suggests a Gujerat tourism office in a hotel. The office is locked but the man on the desk gives me a number scrawled on the wall which he says is for the Vijay Vilas Hotel. I had tried to contact them before without success. The same happens now; the number proves to be

wrong. As the hotel is about 5km out of town with only about five rooms the decision is difficult but I decide to go for it. Several rickshaw wallahs will not take me. I ask a policeman who hails a driver who says that there is a lot of traffic on the road. The policeman persuades him and bargains him down from 200 to 100, about twice the normal fare. The journey takes about an hour and the traffic is dense. We even make detours through back streets and footpaths through the countryside and as we sit in the hot sun, I wonder what to do if there is no room for me. I shall not be able to get an auto back so it will be a hot walk of an hour and a half to the town and possibly no room there, so another bus ride. It turns out that the annual Jain Mela is to happen near to the hotel and that is the cause of the traffic. The auto driver drops me about 100m from the hotel.

The hotel has a room, but for just one night, which is not too bad. I should be able to get a room in Palitana for the second night and the traffic should be back to normal. The room is large, with dressing room, bathroom, fan, terrace and view of the hills. It costs 1390/= for full board and I can stay until the new people arrive, possibly at tea time. The afternoon is spent very pleasantly chatting to the uncle of the owner and sitting on the veranda drinking tea and reading. I make a short expedition around the hotel to take photographs, wash shirt and have dinner which is very good; home cooking with a mix of Gujarati and Rajastani vegetarian dishes. Bed by nine for an early start and a decent night in spite of 30°C and no AC.

Thursday, 20th March

Up at five fifteen ready for a six am breakfast, with porridge as ordered, bananas, toast and Nescafe.

We leave at 6.30; I am accompanied by my shadow, the thirteen year old grandson. Yesterday the uncle announced that the boy would be coming with me. He turns out to be good company, quite precocious, knowledgeable about the local wildlife, with fluent English. He is on holiday from his school in Jodhpur.

The hour and a half climb, again on steps, passes pleasantly with plenty of conversation. On the way there are Jain nuns in white robes who do not want to be photographed and the 'milkmaids' of the guide book taking their curds to the top for the pilgrims. At the top, and en route, there are many temples to visit but it is not always clear where one can go and what photographs are allowed. I decide that I daren't risk the curds although it looks good and my shadow has two plates. I make a detour to view the route from Palitana which is longer and more gentle; it also looks a lot busier. The top has good views in addition to the temples, particularly of a large dammed river. The descent is fairly rapid with a side path to view the path to another summit.

When we get back the room is still available and so after a shower, change and reading on the veranda, it is time for lunch with more talk with the family, more reading and final departure at three. After a walk to the village I soon pick up a shared rickshaw which gradually picks up to be full on arrival in town. The bare knuckle ride costs 5Rs. The hotel Someru (where the tourist desk was) has a non AC room for 200 which is very grubby and basic but acceptable. It seems that there would not have been a room in town on the previous evening. Tea in the restaurant (with a plate

provided for my brought in packet of biscuits), shower and then it is time to go out to explore.

At the station there will be a train at 8.35 next morning and then a walk along the Bhavnagar road takes me to the Mansi Park restaurant (about 3km) for a Dosa and soda. Afterwards a shared motorbike rickshaw takes me back to the town. The walk through the town is atmospheric at dusk. I phone the Hotel Mascot in Ahmedabad to book a room for two nights and then return to the hotel for a restless night at 31□.

Friday, 21st March

Up early and shower to leave at seven for walk to bus stand, buying biscuits for journey en route. There is a bus to Ahmedabad 'at eight' but it arrives and departs at 7.50. The bus is a 'luxury' one, 2x2 with reclining seats and video and costs 116Rs for 210km. Initially the countryside is interesting but later it is very flat with lots of cotton and dual carriage way road. After getting through the suburban traffic arrival at the bus stand in the hot sun is at 12.45. It is a longish walk through the city, mainly Muslim, to the hotel which is now called the Abhishek not the Mascot. I choose an executive room with bath tub which is comfortable but grubby but with good AC for 1400 + 260 tax. Room service lunch, from a local restaurant is moderate with good fresh juice.

After lunch out for a walk which turns out to be long through different areas. Some are obviously prosperous and there has been plenty of building and clearing up of the riverside in the last four years. At a modern supermarket I stock up with goodies and then back through a densely packed Muslim area just before sunset on Friday evening. Back at the hotel I go for an early night with plenty of sleep.

Saturday, 22nd March

After a reasonable breakfast from room service I leave the hotel at 9.15. Not much traffic but a lot of police; it turns out to be Holi. A fairly pleasant walk via a sixteenth century mosque takes me to the Calico Museum turns out to be fruitless; all museums are closed and I cannot evening sit in the grounds. So the day is largely wasted with a lot of walking through hot, dusty streets. After a decent lunch in another hotel comes a relaxing, cooling afternoon with books and puzzles. At seven I get my emails at a local cyber café and return for another early decent night.

Sunday, 23rd March

The usual routine is followed by the arrival of my ordered breakfast at 7.30. I then go to the reception to check out but an argument ensues over whether breakfast is included or not. Eventually I get away at eight and walk briskly through the quiet Sunday morning streets to the station arriving sweaty. The train is at ten not 9.50 so there is plenty of time. The train starts here so it is at the platform although the fans and air conditioning are not available. One bookstall opens with poor selection of English books; no newspapers and I choose Jon Grisham rather than Jeffery Archer.

The power comes on but the train does not leave until 10.30 and goes via Gandhinagar which is not en route – slightly unnerving. We arrive at the first scheduled stop an hour late and at Abu

Road fifty minutes late.

A driver approaches me and offers a fare of 300Rs which seems a good price and he is probably a private unlicensed driver. The interesting drive into the hills takes about an hour to the Palace Hotel who are expecting me. The room is very comfortable with lots of screened windows. There is no hot water so I have a tepid bath and go out for a walk of about an hour and a half. The interval before dinner is taken up by tea and biscuits on the terrace, reading and ordering dinner. The answer is come back in half an hour, after which it is ready and good. I go back to my room for a poor night in spite of effective air conditioning.

Monday, 24th March

Up at 6.30, warm bath and to breakfast at seven. It is good with porridge and lots of fruit, oranges, bananas and papaya. The coffee is instant so I order a pot of Darjeeling.

I go out for a walk at 8.30, first going up the steps to the Adhar Devi temple, where lights are being lit and swastikas being painted on each step. After going down again I make my way along Craig's Path to the Ganesh Temple and Honeymoon Point. There is a rather daunting notice about walking alone with the prospect of wild animals. The scenery is first rate with good views down to the plains. Baileys Walk is blocked by a security guard so the way is along the lake side and the polo ground back to the town centre where I find a café with real coffee and a tasty brownie for a high price by Indian standards. A helpful man takes me to the post office where he says there are postcards but no and in turn I am sent to the fun centre where they have cards, but not of Mount Abu. The next stop is at the tourist office where there is a useful map and then a gentle walk takes me to hotel as the cumulus clouds are gathering.

At the hotel I find a very pleasant place to sit reading but soon I retreat to the terrace as the rain starts and a thunderstorm develops with heavy rain and the phone rings with every clap of thunder!

After a very restful afternoon and when the rain stops it is to the Dilwara Temples. Since everything is still wet I get very wet and muddy socks, but the temples are as fine as ever. I get back to a less than restful evening with dirty bath water and several approaches to the management to get it cleared. Food ordered for seven arrives at 7.20. The food is good but the restaurant is full of insects. Another poor night ensues and I wonder about the altitude, but that is only 1200m.

Tuesday, 25th March

A brisk walk before breakfast to Dilwara, damp and cool, stimulates the appetite for a meal similar to yesterday.

Afterwards I take a longish roundabout walk to town for the bank, post office, coffee and cookies and back to the hotel to clear the room by twelve. Again the clouds gather before I have lunch at 1.30. Sitting outside is soon curtailed by more heavy rain. The taxi arrives at 3.20, costs 400Rs and takes 50 minutes to the station for the 5.10 train which turns out to be an hour late. The ride to

Mumbai is comfortable in the usual 2AC bunk.

Wednesday, 26th March

The train is an hour late into Bandra terminus arriving at 7.45. I walk to the local station and catch a slow train to the CST and walk to the Suba Palace Hotel. My room is available immediately and the stored luggage appears. The shower and the south Indian buffet breakfast are both welcome.

After a rest I spend the morning in the Prince of Wales Museum which costs 300Rs including an audio guide but I balk at the extra 200 for the camera. The museum is very interesting (much better than the Calcutta Indian Museum) and the audio guide good. There is a well stocked shop where I get a few bits and pieces and go back to the hotel.

In the afternoon the train take me to Mahalaxshmi for the Ali tomb and the Dhobi Ghats. In the evening another excellent meal at the Trishna with tasty prawns.

Thursday, 27th March

After a restful night and a late start I have a walk around Colaba and the Army station and a morning coffee. In the afternoon the boat (100/= return) to Elephanta Island which takes an hour. The entry fee is 250 and worth it for the location but the temples are not as extensive as the Ajanta and Ellora caves.

On returning I find the Strand bookshop which has a good stock which I raid, Salmon at the Trishna, luggage from the Suba Palace and a taxi to the airport. I find a place for a bucket 'shower' with very little room for clothes and bag.