

India Diary Feb'10

These rough notes have been written for my many Friends and whoever is interested in a trip to India. This is not an Essay on Grammar and I write as I speak and do mix the past and the presence. There will be many spelling mistakes and no Prizes to who can find the most mistakes. Many Names can simply be Goggles for further information.



Tuesday 26th Jan and I am on the Jet Airways Flight to Mumbai, listening to Indian Classical Slide Guitar, feeling unusually mellow. Possibly the Cognac helped? Purpose of visit is to go to a Rajasthani Folk Festival in Jaisalmer. My first time to that Town before going back to Mumbai and then Kerala. Thanks to the Internet I have done my own Itinerary. Not easy but as this must be my 20th visit. I know India fairly well. My last minute preparations went well and I double-checked my list. I like making lists and had a pile of Printouts with me plus more as a Security precaution. I am often asked by People who go to India for the

first time “what do I do?”

So here it goes: Lots of Research, Malaria Tablets, checking your Holiday vaccination, Visa, Continental 2 pin Adaptor, Torch, Universal Bath Plug, Antibacterial Gel, Photocopy of Passport and Visa, a spare unlocked phone and a Passport photo. Anything else you forgot you can purchase there. The reason I say Mobile phone is that you can purchase on arrival an Airtel Simcard for around 900 Rupees, around £13.00. Currently there are 70 Rupees for one Pound Sterling. Simcard is for Life and top up is on almost every Street corner shop displaying an Airtel sign. Cost of texting home is 5 Rupees and calls are as little as 10 Rupees. I have never paid more than 100 Rupees for a really long call. The phone is not just for phoning home but you do need it for local calls. Everyone in India has a Mobile and your Taxi may park away from you and the Driver will say, just give me a missed call and I come, or I phone the Hotel Reception and ask them to talk to the Driver if he cannot speak English. The Phone is my Life line. Any Airport has a pre-paid Taxi Service or better still hire a Car and Driver for the Day. Cost in Mumbai was 1000 Rupees for 8 hours, that under £15.00. Best to change some money at the Airport but Hotels give a better rate. No matter how often you wash your Hands at Home, in India do it twice as often. Because of the liquid restriction in Hand luggage I do use many of the various Wipes.

27th Jan.

The Flight arrived on time.(01.00am) The Suitcase took a while to come but Immigration and Custom was extremely quick. I had planned to stay at the Airport rather than go to an Airport Hotel for the few hours. Mumbai Airport does not sleep and flights arrive all through the Night. I tried to sleep in one of the Chairs but not possible. At 7am I took the free Shuttle to the Domestic Airport where I had Breakfast and checked my Suitcase in. Then a 3 hour wait as usual delay because of Fog in Dehli. January is particular severe. Each year the Airport is modernized and there is always some building work taking place. At last we took off and I arrived at 13.30 in Jodpur. My Hotel Driver was there to meet me as I had booked all pick ups in advance for the first time. He stopped for me on Route to the Hotel as I needed to buy an extra Sports Bag because my Case was heavy and as I was coming back to the same place on the 31st I wanted to repack and leave some things behind. After a short drive we reached the Hotel Polo Heritage which was very nice and only 2500 Rupees. My Room is very elegant and more than twice the size of my Double Room at Home, Bathroom even bigger. After a Bath, Snack and a spot of Sunbathing in the Garden I went for early Dinner but between asking for the Bill and the Waitress bringing it I fell asleep and she woke me up. Then an early Night watching a bit of TV. I had a text from the Travel

Agent on my Indian Cell phone with the Name of the Driver, Car Registration and an Emergency Number for the next morning as my Train for Jaisalmer was leaving at 5am.

28th I booked a wake up call at 4am and got a coffee. By 4.30am the Driver came and dropped me at the Station. I have never seen so many Bodies sleeping on the Floor. Hardly any place to walk. I don't think I have ever been that early at a Station? After just 5 min. it was clear that the Train was 2.30hours late. Not a big deal here. Its that Dehli Fog again. Each Jan. it causes Chaos. I joined a Group of Tourists and we stood around chatting. One Guy had a Blackberry Phone. I was impressed when he found my Compartment No on his screen via Internet. Finally we scrambled onto the Train. Each Compartment had 6 Sleeper Bunk Beds. Luckily No 9 was the lower Berth. It was very cold early morning as Rajasthan is in the North plus the Air-condition was fierce. I was glad to have my Overcoat with me. I did not get a blanket but had my Foam Travel Pillow. After 2 hours of some sleep I woke and looked out. I was dying for a coffee, but no luck and I was cold. Finally we reached Jaisalmer with additional delay as the Train had stopped on Route several times. Could not see my Driver but used my phone and he appeared shortly after. The Hotel Gorbandh Palace was a short drive only. It was an other impressive Hotel and I got a great welcome, Flowers, music and a drink. I was glad to get to the Washroom after the usual signing in. Again I had a Bath, a hot Soup and an hour in the Garden. I had asked my local Travel Agent Swaghat Tours to change the Driver as he could not speak English and I had asked for an English speaking Driver, so in the evening the new Driver plus a Guide took me to the open Air Festival (3 day) which was the purpose of my visit. The Festival was very spectacular. At 9.30pm it finished and back to the Hotel for a good nights sleep.



29th I cannot believe it but I slept till 11am. I don't think I have ever slept that late and it must have been hunger that woke me? I had a quick bite to eat by the Pool. Luckily I had arranged a 13.00pm pick up but the Festival had a morning program which I had not planned to attend as I knew I needed some sleep. I must have had a premonition? There was nobody else around. All Deckchairs were empty. Must tell the German Tourist Board. I had a quick swim but it was cold. My new Guide **Anu** was waiting for me. Nobody in India is on time and I was surprised. We stopped for some freshly squeezed Juice (which is done in front of you)

than to the Festival which started with Camel Racing. After the Show there was a long interval and I used that opportunity to visit the Rajasthani Folk Musicians which I knew lived there and I had met in UK on several occasions. Some I had promoted. It was a happy meeting. I felt terrible not taking their Dinner Invitation but I had been ill previously in Rajasthan and I was scared. Other Places in India had never affected me. Anu was an excellent Guide and showed me several Palaces of incredible Beauty and the yellow Sandstone was full of delicate carvings which seemed to cover every inch. When we stopped at a Lake Anu played some Songs on his Mobile and I had a phone with an empty Music File as I have no idea how to get Music on my Phone? He downloaded all his Songs via Bluetooth and I was simply thrilled. I cannot grasp all of that Technology. At 6pm we stopped at a very nice Restaurant in the Desert. Nobody else about. The View was beautiful and I played my Music. I must get Headphones. We ordered for us three and Anu went into the Kitchen to make sure (at my request) that I get Chapattis made with Bottled Water. Since I only had 2 toasts this morning I am pretty hungry and Dinner was really good and around £10.00 which is not cheap for a local Restaurant. The evening Cultural Show started at 7.30 and again it was well organized and spectacular with the lit Jaisalmer Fort as the Backdrop and thousands of Indian



and English Tourist mingling. By 10pm I was back and as the Hotel Internet was free I decided to clear my 41 messages. Also checked my answer machine at home and cleared/deleted the messages. I prefer doing this on Holiday as I dislike coming home and spend hours listening and replaying messages. Than I decided to count my money. As I hide it in different places which I can never remember it takes a while. Now watching BBC World Service. Have text a few friends and got a UK Weather report in reply. Cold, raining and mine was hot and sunny(at least during the day)



30th An other unusual Day. Stated normal with a swim, Breakfast, quick Internet and packing for one night as we had arranged a pick up at 11am. Shame to leave the Hotel to stay at a Tent. It really is beautiful here with each Room having its own Garden and a large Terrace. The Grounds are huge. Sharp at 11am I got picked up and we stopped again for fresh Juice. Than a trip to the Golden Fort. Do check Google. The Fort is like a mini City, over 4000 People live here. Beautifully carved Sandstone Buildings are everywhere. Inside the Fort there are dozens of Shops, Banks, Internet Café, Restaurants etc. I had my Hand painted with

Henna, than a coffee on a Rooftop Terrace and I took photos of the most stunning view overlooking the entire City. I bought some Postcards and a simple white Shawl which I will need in Mumbai/Bombay for a Cemetery visit. I have not bought a single souvenir since arrival. Gone are the days when I had to buy something in every Shop. We drove to an other nice Rooftop Restaurant and had an excellent Lunch as I had been warned that Dinner would be late. At 3pm we started to make our way to the Sam and Sand Dune Tent Village but stopped on Route at Kuldhara Village

which had been deserted for over 200 years, now a Heritage Site. It was a large settlement made of Stone Houses, now fallen down but the Stones had been held together without any Cement. Just after 4pm we reached the Tent site. There were many Tent Villages on the way and each Site had a Herd of Camels outside. After checking in (no Front Desk) no Keys, it was off to the Sand Dunes, but first I must say I have never seen such a luxury Tent. Larger again as my Bedroom at Home with Double Bed, shelve units, Sofa and Coffee Table. The entire Canvas was embroidered on the inside and fully carpeted. I had one electric Ceiling Light but no electric Socket to charge my Phone. The Tent had an Extension with a fully furnished Bathroom, European style. But no TV. I was not expecting it. The compulsory Camel Ride to the Dunes was part of a package but I opted for the Camel & Cart instead of the Ride which I have done several times in North Africa but never really enjoyed. Anu was supposed to drive back after dropping me but



he decided to come to the Camel trip to see the Sunset along with hundreds of other Tourists, mainly Indian Tourists. Quite a sight. We got back at 6.30pm and he left with the Driver. Shortly afterwards the Outdoor Show started. Well organized. We sat in a 2 Tier Circle, on Mattresses and cushions, Tea and Snacks were served and in the middle there was a large Campfire which added to the Atmosphere. Musicians and Dancers performed on bare rough Concrete. After the Show Dinner was served in the large Restaurant Tent but I did not eat much. I went to my Tent but could not sleep as Music was coming from



other parts of the Camp Site. I felt strange not being able to lock up and it was not very warm.

31st. Woke up early in time for the Sunrise which is watched by the majority of the Tourists and some go back to the Dunes but I stayed. Coffee was served but undrinkable. It was Goats milk sprinkled with

some coffee flakes but the Toast was ok. After a walk in the early morning Sun Anu came to pick me up. He was always spot on time and after one hour drive we were back in Jaisalmer. I had my usual fresh Juice. It was Sunday but everything was open. As I had time before the afternoon Train back to Jodhpur I decided to visit a Beauty Parlour as I had been covered in Dust for the past 4 days. Even my Throat was hurting and I was taking my Lozenges. Anyhow suffice to say that the Beauticians in India are the best in the World and I should know. I ended up spending 4 hours getting a Head to Toe treatment. It costs £21.00 which is expensive in Jodhpur but would cost more than 5 times as much back home and worth every Penny! No more hard Skin on my Feet. There was just enough time for a late Lunch at the same Place as yesterday and than to the Railway Station. The Train was on time and it was good bye to both my Team. I have not had a full time Guide on previous visits and it was a pity to move on. I gave a generous Tip as they both deserved it. This time my six Berth Compartment plus two more across was occupied by lively People. Nobody wanted to sleep and Strangers soon became Friends. That is what is so great about India. There was a lively conversation in Hindi and I could make out the odd Word. My phone rang and it turned out to be the wrong Number which made everyone laugh as I had spoken a few words in Hindi. Than I made a few calls to Mumbai and I arrived back in Jodhpur by ten pm. Very early this time only 5 hours of traveling time. Outside the Railway Station I was surrounded by Taxi Drivers as my Driver was a few min. late. He must have been as surprised as myself that the Train was on time. I was glad to see him. Now back in the same Hotel Polo Heritage and I got the same Room No 15. Needless to say I enjoyed my hot Bath. Made a few more calls and watched TV. No Dinner but I always carry Muesli Bars. Again the Hotel seemed almost empty.



1st Feb.

It is past midnight and an other full day has come to an end. To start I had a good Breakfast. As I did not need to be at the Airport till 1pm, I wanted to see the Jodhpur Fort but Reception informed me that the Road had been closed and to go the long way round was outside my Schedule, so I settled on the Driver taking me around Town. I stopped at various Shops and finally came across a Shop that sold unusual Shawls and I weakened. Time for my fresh Pomegranate Juice. A Friend of a Friend in the UK had

asked me to drop in at his House for Tea but I phoned to say it was getting late. At the Airport I had my first real good coffee since arrival. Branches of “Café Day” are all over India. It is their type of Starbucks. The flight stopped at Udaipur and I arrived late at Mumbai. Luggage took a long time and I could not see my Driver. It took a few phone calls and it turned out he was waiting at the wrong Terminal despite the Flight Number. When he finally came I realized he was already 7pm but today was the best day for going to a specific Dress each year from Tailors take less than the worst in the World. Somehow we reached my Hotel Ashrey by surprised at the incredible changes I notice each year. I should be happy that India is rapidly moving into the 21st Century but part of me is wanting it to change less quickly. India is one giant Building Site wherever you are traveling to. The Driver has promised to be back by 10am tomorrow and I am keeping my Fingers crossed. This is the third Year I am staying in the same Hotel. At 2200 Rupees it is very inexpensive for Mumbai but spotless. Because I need to stay close to the Shanmukhananda Hall it is ideal. Good Room Service too! Finally unpacked and got a wake up call for tomorrow.



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2nd Feb.

Wake up call and coffee at the same time. I phoned Reception to say no hot Water but silly me forgot to hit the middle switch. It worked! Did not remember that. Walked outside and found an Internet Café. Cleared my emails. I cannot bear to come home to all of that. One email was from the National Lottery on line telling me that my ticket had expired. I tried to do it on line but the clever Computer knew I was outside the UK and it would not let me renew. Bought some Bananas for Breakfast and had fresh Juice. Healthy start but than it all went unhealthy. Bought a

Box of Indian Sweets and some Savory Snacks for my planned visit. The Driver Santosh came at 10am and I was truly amazed as I fully expected him late. Indian time simply is not the same as English time. It took a good 1 ½ hours to reach Malabar Hills. I have to explain that 2010 is the 10th Anniversary of Ustad Alla Rakha's Death. He was a living Legend and taught and played Tabla all his Life and did a lot for Indian Music. He traveled with Ravi Shankar for 27 years and was hugely loved and admired and I loved him very much. I met him in the UK and also in Mumbai where he lived at Simla House with his Family. His Son Ustad Zakir Hussain is equally famous literally all over the World. (Do use Google for search) Many times over the years I was invited for Dinners and the entire Family is warm and hospitable. The 2 others Sons Taufic and Fazal are also Household Names in India but they don't tour non-stop like Zakir. Their Sister Khurshid lives in London and holds annual musical memorial Concerts at the Queen Elizabeth Hall at the end of April where I help Backstage. A great tragedy happened in November when Amaji(Ustad Alla Rakhas Widow) passed away. Khurshid was in India and stayed to see to all the various rituals. She is stuck in London and simply cannot get a Visa until 2 month have expired since her last visit. This is cruel as it is an administrative nonsense caused by the Indian Governments new Rules and is inhuman. Having just lost her Mother she cannot attend the special Ceremony at the Cemetery. Well, I reached Simla House and joined the Group of Women. Everyone had their Hair covered with a Shawl and that's why I bought mine. The Men and Boys were in the next Room praying. I just sat but could not join in as I don't speak any Urdu. After the Prayer Food was served and I gave up thoughts of a Diet. I met many dear Friends including my Friend Krishna. She is like a Sister and I have been to her House in Kolkata. Some People have a real Gift in creating that warm special feeling inside you. One young Girl had come from USA. She is traveling the World sponsored by some musical fellowship. How lucky can you get? After Lunch there was a 3 hour Break before the Cemetery Visit, so we both went shopping taking my Car and Driver and we had a long chat. We split as I only wanted to go to the Music Shop Rhythm House which is a famous Record Shop. I also wanted to go to Chimanlal (best Writing Paper Shop) but even so we found the Street it was one way. After crawling ½ hour we gave up as I only had just over one hour to get to the Cemetery and we reached on time. Everyone bought Flowers and Garlands and more Prayers were said. Than we all separated as tomorrow is an other big Day. It is because of this event that I have booked this trip to India and the extra Days before and after are an addition. I usually come straight home after 3 days but the horrible weather persuaded me to get some Sun. When we got back to the Hotel I freshened up and went back to the Internet Café. I feel totally safe to walk in the dark, even in the Under path .The Streets are filled with People doing their shopping. All Day I did not see a single accident despite everyone changing Lanes and cutting each other up. I found an Airtel Kiosk and topped up my Simcard. The calls to Germany and UK are quite long but most are under £ 0.50 pence. Made one call to my Neighbour to get my Lottery Numbers and one call to my Friends to buy my ticket. What would I do without them. Than I had Dinner in the Restaurant next Door which I tried on previous visits. Simple, clean but fantastic. Half a Tandoori Chicken(mini size) tomatoes and Onion Salad. A bottle of Water , total 120

Rupees. There are 70 Rupees in the Pound, today I got 72 in exchange. I booked a wake up call for 5am. At 6.30am the Concert will start and finishes 11pm, with 2 intervals. Each Year the hall is full. My Hotel is on a major Junction, the Horn is used all the time, but still I manage to sleep with this Noise. Its almost music to me as this is India which I love because of its People. Tomorrow morning the Taxi is coming at 5.45am for the short trip and I have given the Driver a Day off as he will be working long hours on the 4th.

3rd Feb.

Alarm call at 5am and coffee. Left 5.45am with Rucksack full of Biscuits and chocolates. Breakfast was a Muesli Bar. By 6am a Line had formed and Cars and Taxis arrived nonstop. I met up with Kathryn again and we stood together. Met other friends from abroad, who I see only twice a year so lots to catch up. Once inside I gave the Bag of Sweets to Zakir. We sat with the family. Alla Rakhas Grandchildren are all grown up. Many Artists were there who I had promoted over the years. Kala Ramnath, Anuradha Pal, Vijay Ghate, Ronu Majumdar, Rakesh Chaurasia, Shubhaker Bannerjee, Yogesh Samsi and others. These are all incredible Musicians of international reputation. The concert "A Homage to Abbaiji " as he was affection ally known started with Dozens of his now accomplished Ex-Student, followed by Zakir and Shankar Mahavedan, an Indian Idol. Shankar was part of a Swedish Pop Group called Mynta, I promoted them many years ago when Fazal played with that Group. It was clear than that Shankar would make it Mega Big. I made the same prediction about Hariharan almost 20 years ago and it came true. Maybe I should be a Talent Scout. Shankars Voice was incredible. The final morning item was a big surprise to vme. It was Alam Khan on Sarod, the son of the late legendary Ustad Ali Akbar Khan. I had met Alam with his Father when he was a Teenager and last saw him perform 5 years ago at the Southbank when he played well but was not outstanding. Five years of hard work and talent passed down through Generations had transformed him and he played so well that I was moved to Tears. This only happens once in a while when Music touches me. He left straight afterwards and I had no chance of speaking to him. How strange that an email the Day before from a musical friend asking me if I could promote him. Because of new Workpermit Rules this is unlikely. I used the short break to stroll over the nearby Market and had some juice. Next session started at 11am and finished at 4pm. Several Tabla solos followed and Dilshat Khan on Sarangi was amazing. Usually the Sarangi is the main instrument but on a Tabla solo it has to accompany. In the short break there were many "How are you"? as many People met each other after a long time. The Indian Classical Music Scene is a small World and everyone knows everyone. Earlier I had said hello to Shiv Kumar Sharma, a living Legend on Santoor. Again you can google these Artists. We have a joke between us that wherever I see him I give him a Box of Tartan Shortbread biscuits. He always acts surprised. At 4pm I grabbed a Taxi and got back to the Hotel to freshen up and had a late Lunch or early Dinner across the Road in a small Restaurant. I had Masala Dosa, looks like a Crepe Suzette but is made of Rice Flour and very crispy. Its is rolled up and very large with the edges hanging over the side of the Plate stuffed with delicious Potatoes, onions and Peas. Always served with Coconut Chutney and a bowl full of Sambar(Lentil Soup) Very tasty and only 35 Rupees, that's £).50 pence followed by Icecream and a Bottle of Water. I am on a voluntary Detox. Alcohol is available everywhere through Off Licenses but small Restaurants rarely have a License. Don't buy at the UK Airport but buy in India. They have excellent Brandy, Rum, Gin etc. I have to confess I did buy a small miniature of Honeybee Brandy in Rajasthan as I was so cold but of course purely for medicinal purpose. I also have this time my Electric Travel Kettle for the odd hot Drink when I don't want to be disturbed by Room Service. Before getting back to the Hall in time for 6pm I checked the Internet and found I had won £25.00 on the Premium Bonds, that is 1750 Rupees. The evening session started late and Zakir had a surprise up his Sleeve. The Bollywood Idol Asha Bosle opened the evening and brought the House down. Around 2000 People. After that a Jazz Drummer with a long solo

that blew everyone away. There is no written Program and the Names are not known to me but he was announced as Billy H.... One by one other Musicians were introduced until eleven Musicians created Magic. Here in India most of the audience go backstage and it is all very chaotic. I had to wait for a Lift as it is not advisable for a Woman alone to travel late at night in a Taxi, some do. With Drivers not speaking English I am not prepared to risk it. Anyhow I got home safely. I was invited to have Tea by Zakir and his Family for the next morning but I am seeing a Uk friend across Town and Simla House is in the opposite direction. At the end of April we will all meet up at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Feel free to book your tickets. My event Page gives all the details.

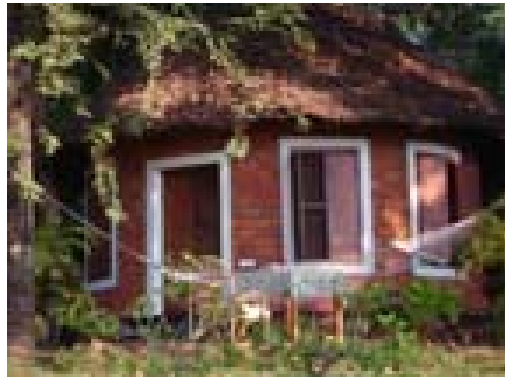
4th Feb.

Today is my last day in Mumbai and I got up early but started slow. Read the Paper and watched the Indian TV Breakfast Show in English. Made some Green tea and had a Cereal Bar. Santosh, my Driver was asked to come at 10am which left plenty of time for my fresh Pomegranate Juice. The Guy knows me now. Opposite him sits a Lady on the Pavement. She sells Tea from a Kettle and has a small open fire. She talks and smiles a lot for 12 hours a day. We had a conversation, not sure if she understood anything but she smiled and nodded. Went for a light Breakfast in the same Place where I had Lunch yesterday. I need to cross the busy Junction via the Under path. I worked out all the exits. At each exit there is a Watchman/Security Guard sitting there all Day with a Stick. Never seen him use it but it gives a reassuring feeling. The Streets are so busy, every Shop and Street Seller seems to be making a living. The Streets get swept each Day and are very clean, dust is everywhere of course but no litter. The Restaurant was busy with People stopping of before going to work. I see Business Men, a Lady on her own, Couples and single People. 2 Toast and coffee was 49 Rupees, about £0.70 pence. There is no Staff Shortage here. One Waiter for every two Tables plus young Boys in a different Uniform who clear up. They also wipe the Floor often. I got back for 10am and blow me the Driver was on time. I cannot get over it. I feel a bit guilty as I think I frightened him. Yes, I can see you all smiling now. That's Gilda when she is not happy. We started of to drive to my Chelmsford Friends House . They bought an Apartment last year but it was not ready when I last came. We reached early but I phoned ahead and was told to come early. As always the Driver has to wait in the Car, sorry Folks but those are the Rules here. I do always give him Lunch money to go and have something. Snigdha and Mohan are exceptionally kind and generous Friends and regularly throw their Doors open to all their friends and are much loved. They also raise money for Charities. I got the guided tour as the Place was massive. Two Apartments had been knocked into one on the 19th Floor and the View is stunning if you ignore the Building that is still going on. Each Bedroom has a Balcony and there are several Guest Rooms. I have picked mine for 2011 and Snigdha laughs. After a delicious home cooked Lunch I went out with Snigdha for some Food Shopping in a large Hypermarket, called Hyper City. We asked Santosh to drive. After stopping also at several Shops I settled for one Top at 375 Rupees. Than we had a really good coffee in the Mall. Yes, they have a Blue Water Type Mall here. Snigdha did more Shopping than I did as I had to watch the weight. At 5pm we got back and I dropped her. On Route to the Hotel was a Shop called Trendsetter which had been recommended to me, but I was not impressed and bought just some cotton leggings for the Gym. I phoned local friend of a friend and she gave the Driver directions. Several of my friends have Property here. Back to the Hotel where I had to pay the Driver for the Days, Plus Parking and Tolls. Total Bill was 3360 Rupees , just under £50.00 which I think is more than reasonable. It was also good of the Company not to ask for a Deposit. Yes, I gave Santosh a big tip. I knew it was big as I have seen him smile like that before. I went round my usual Place as I wanted non Veg Food. Excellent Chicken Curry and Tandoori Nan for 180 Rupees. My Dish was one of the most expensive. Quick trip to the Internet café where I have to show my Passport each time. I know some of you don't like to go onto the Internet while on Holiday but I have no Stress here whereas if I left it all till I got home I would be far

more stressed as I get a lot. I also clear the answer machine each day which only costs 6 Rupees and I don't have to spent the first hour of coming home standing there pressing the replay button which used to drive me crazy. I phoned the Kerela Hotel to confirm pick up from the Airport and I booked a wake up call for 3.45am as my flight is 5.35am and the Taxi is booked. Whenever I use the phone here I get real People, not the Indian Call Centre that have driven me crazy at home for some time. Its 10.30pm now so I wont get much sleep. My Room looks like it has been burgled and somehow I have to pack. I wish there was somebody telling me to hurry up.

5th Feb


Well finally got to sleep only to be woken up by a Text message from Uk. I usually switch it off but was expecting a wake up call at 4am from UK. Next call was 3.30 by the Hotel. Got ready in record time and struggled down 3 flights of Stairs as I did not want to wake the Porter. I have no idea how I will manage the London Underground? After years of training by Ryan Air to travel light this time I took too much and regretted it since arriving. Jet Air allow 32kg but I only have 20kg. Taxi was on time and I got my back up call from Uk. It only took 15min to the Airport instead of half an hour. Taxi was only 200 Rupees, less than £3.00. Petrol is 50 Rupees a litre. Domestic Car sales up by 32% in Jan, so traffic will get worse. Airport check in was smooth and fast. The Clerk at the check in desk never spoke a single word and I was tempted to tell him that I packed this case all by myself and never left it unattended but decided not to get smart. Not easy to keep my Mouth shut. Had a double Espresso and a hot chocolate Croissant. Cost was more than last nights Dinner. Flight usual half an hour late. The Shuttle Bus that



took us to the Plane drove International Airport in long drive on the Road. have not seen but Maybe next time? Usual of the journey. Changed Magazine about a Sufi and its been on my list for Delhi and could stay often Hotels. The new A group of 50 Men, all Doti's, a long Cotton Sarong and all have Mustaches. Must be a Moustache Convention? Our Row has been briefed about operating the emergency exits but before the Stewardess could say anything one Guy had already pulled the Handle and removed it. We are all laughing as she gives him a severe lecture and kept saying 10 times, do not touch it. After an other 25 min flying we arrived. I am in Kereal, the Garden of Eden. My Driver was there holding up my Name. I am getting used to that and will miss it in Heathrow. Here little traffic and 40 min later I arrive at the Somatheeram Ayurveda Beach Resort, have a look at www.somatheeram.in I got a guided Tour , just as well as I tend to get lost and the Place is huge. I have a beautiful Round Thatched Cottage overlooking the entire Beach and Ocean, surrounded by beautiful Gardens and I have my own Garden with Table, Hammock and Chairs. It was too nice to unpack, usually I have to do it right away. After registry and Consultation with the Doctor I got booked in for my first Treatment at 2pm. That left enough time to get to the Pool. I had to do a very personal detailed questionnaire and my Treatment got chosen for me. Those who have no knowledge of Ayurveda please google it. This is not hocus pocus but an ancient art of traditional Health Science. I have been given a Program of 2 hour sessions daily. I like the name of the Treatment, called Rejuvenation. I got a lot of reading material and wont bore you with the details but it is fascinating! Do Google. At 2pm I am back and what a treat! First the Head massage , followed by the hot oil applied all over the Body. This

goes on for a long time , than I have to lie down and the second Girl comes and massages me with her Feet while holding on to a Rope suspended from the Ceiling and she puts as much of her Bodyweight on me as I can take, asking me all the time if it is too much? As she is tiny it was fine but glad she was not 16stone. It must be the Diet but I never saw a big Local Person. Finally both Girls massage me again forever. They have incredibly strong Fingers and have to train at a colleague. Than finally comes a Treatment called Sirodhara and herbal oil mixed with medicated Milk is poured on your Forehead in a continuous motion sideways and I am asleep. It took a while to come round.I get a Hospital type dressing Gown and sit outside for a while and you are told not to Shower immediately. I cannot wait for tomorrow. Finally I finish unpacking and one last time I am kicking myself for taking so much. The large Double Bed is fully covered with a Mosquito Net. I take my Torch and Water inside the Net. At 4.30 I got so hungry I had Biscuits and Peanuts. The Dining Room does not open till 7pm. Got ready early and talked to my Neighbour from London. The Buffet has all the Fruits, Salads and hot and cold Food, European and Traditional but little or no Salt and not too spiced as this is a Health Resort, neither Alcohol or red Meat. I picked a Table next to the open Air Stage and watched various Indian Classical Dances for 2 hours. The Standard was very high considering this is Hotel Entertainment.

6th Feb

My first full day in Kerela and by 8am I walked to the Beach fully refreshed. Because the Resort is on a steep Slope there are many steps leading down to the Beach. Maybe not suited for the Elderly. What am I saying? I am elderly. Only on Paper. I passed many round Huts/Cottages with beautiful Gardens and was pleased that mine was so well located with a full view as some were surrounded by Palm Trees with little daylight. Finally on the Beach. I walked for an hour and the Sun is very hot. Boys are playing Football, Fishermen pulling in their Nets singing together and Tourists already swimming in the Sea. The locals are very friendly but did not try very hard to sell things. One or two polite No is all. This is not the same in other places. The Palm Forest and this is a Picture
entire Beach is surrounded by Postcard setting. I am playing my the view. Back for Breakfast and the Garden. Have not tried the for the Yoga. It said it is for advanced for me. It lasted 90 min. short sunbathing session and a Everyone here is on a package always busy with dozens of Staff and Treatment Rooms.Again I have to see the Doctor for Blood Pressure and Pulse check. Mine was same as yesterday. I enjoyed it again very much. Than resting. By the time I wash out the oil from the Hair and read the Paper it was time to get ready for Dinner. Again I had my emergency ration of Nuts and Fruit. I am trying to lose weight. No luck, but I am not having Wine which I miss but it saves on calories. The resort provides Live Entertainment each night and tonight is Indian Classical Music. The South Indian System is called Karnatic Music, very different from the northern style. Two German Girls came and sat with me as the view of the Stage was better and we chatted after the Music finished. They want to come back and I understand. Kerela is largely Catholic and tomorrow is Sunday. The Music is very special in Kerela Churches and on my last visit I went to Church and bought some music. There is a special language called Malayaram and the Music is very soothing to the Western Ear.

7th Feb

Only day three and I am so chilled it feels like I have been here for ages. I think 7 days is fine for most People but many stay longer. We spend so much on maintaining the Car and House but better to spend it on your Body. I keep saying it but it is Heaven. Nov-Feb is the coolest month but Sept to April is

bookable and Prices vary. There is no Aircondition here and very hot outside but every Hut (they call it Cottage) is very cool being build round with Ventilation and 3 Windows, no Glass, just Wooden Shutters for the night but otherwise open. Roof is thatched and it seems to keep it cool. I hardly use the Ceiling Fan which is very quiet fortunately and does not squeak. I cannot get enough of the view here. If you can live without Wine and TV for 7 days than come here. This morning after Breakfast I strolled outside the Resort Gate but never got further than 100 yards as it was too tempting to look at the Shops. For the Ladies I recommend bring a Pattern or your Garment that you wish duplicated as the Tailors are excellent here. Wonderful Silks to choose from. I tried to tell the shopkeeper I only buy what I need not what I want which he could not grasp but of course I am only Human and slip up. I passed a Music Shop and got talking and he played several Cd's for me but I did not buy anything. He had a sign on the Wall which I liked. " Love is like Music, the more you experience it, the more pleasure . Most unrivalled of all human passion love increases in intensity with time"

Than I had to get back for Yoga Class which is really difficult but I am getting the hang of it and the breathing. All this is not normally in my comfort zone but I decided to stick with it. It does feel good and I am keeping up. Than my 2 hours by the Pool before I had to put on my green Inmate Gown for my treatments. Only difference today was no hot oil on the Forehead but a great Facial instead and a Steam



Bath. I had to get into a wooden Box with my Head sticking out . That felt weird and I had vision of a Magician coming any minute to slice me in half. Back to the Room for my Fruit and a Croissant saved from this morning. I am not that stingy that I cannot buy Lunch but have to keep my Stomach empty and at 4pm its too late as Dinner is at 7pm. I must tell you about Indian Showers. They are great! With some exceptions. the Bathrooms are fully tiled and have a fixed Showerhead plus a large Plastic Bucket and Jug. That's the only Plastic item in the Resort. There is

no cubicle and the entire Bathroom is your Shower and you can splash all you want. I love taking the Jug and pouring it all over me. Went for a pre Dinner Stroll down the Road and had a freshly squeezed Orange Juice which seems to be a standard price of 30 Rupees everywhere. I came across a beautiful Church which was open and I lit 2 candles. More Shops but no shopping . Lots of Food and non Food Stores and Stalls. Had a few min spare and checked on Internet. At 60 Rupees for 30 min that is expensive but not even one Pound. The connection is fast here, so half an hour is plenty. After a few calls it was time for Dinner. This evening the Live Entertainment was a Bamboo Flute and Tabla which I enjoyed.

8th Feb

The Days are going too fast and I am not sure if I really like to go home to the cold? The Days are hot but evenings are pleasant. No Shawl needed and it is not too humid. This morning I went a bit earlier for Breakfast to give myself more time before Yoga and went outside. I found an Auto Rickshaw to take me to Kovalam, approx 25 min. but he wanted 450 Rupees which is outrageous, so I walked to the Bus stop. He came across and dropped the price to 300 Rupees. Still too much as the rate was about 200 but I agreed as I don't mind him making a profit which he did, its my way of helping the Economy. He drove quite fast and dropped me at the Light House and gave me his Mobile and I told him I had to be back by 10am. I walked for half an hour along the Beach, it was much smaller and less attractive than the Chowara Beach were I stay but it was more lively. Again the local and European Tourists all mingled and nobody really pestered the Tourists much. I watched the local Fishermen for a while. They pulled in their Net by standing behind each other and chanted. It can take over an hour to pull in the Nets and I used to watch them on previous visits. It's a hard living but there seems to be a lot of Fish in the Markets and Hotels, so they must catch some? There are Beggars who sit in one spot and Passers by ,

often Indian give to the Beggars. Nobody comes running after you here. I am writing this as some Holiday makers want to come to India but the begging is worrying them. Yes, there is Poverty but I have noticed on each visit that the living standard is rising. I spoke to a German Lady who has come for the first time and she was very shocked as we tend to apply our standards not realizing how fortunate and privileged we are in the West. Here are different priorities and the one thing that still shocks me after visiting India at least 20 times is that there are People who are living on the Street and don't even have a Cardboard Box. You can see them early morning, lighting a Fire on the Pavement and boiling some water. They really have nothing. I prefer to give directly rather than through Charities where the Admin cost swallows some of the Donations. I make exceptions. Everywhere is a hive of activities and I am watching Laborers on a Building Site carrying heavy Loads on their Head in this Heat all Day. That is a hard Life and to not come to India and to stick your Head in the Sand is not the answer. The Roads are full of Street Sellers, often their Stall only has a few items but everyone somehow is selling. The Rickshaw Driver stopped at the Petrol Station and is asking me to pay him, so he can pay for his Petrol. That is normal here. Got back by 10am, quick refresh and off to Yoga. Usual 2 hours by the Pool after that and it's one of my highlights to chill out, followed by another 2 hours of Ayurveda pampering. Again a Facial which is like nothing you get back home, believe me. Many years ago, before my Friend Kim retired as a Beautician I got really good facials in my local Sports Centre. Some of you reading this must think this Woman does not live in the real World. Trust me, I do, but I have gone through so much Shit in the last 2 years I really needed this very special Holiday. To list just a few mishaps (and I do not want to talk about personal tragedy here) there were 2 Car crashes, Hard Drive failure, Motherboard packed up, Flat Roof needed replacing, Water Tank leaked, New Toilet installed, Sky Box packed up, Laptop died, Handbag stolen with everything, also Keys and phones in Barcelona, Kitchen Fan died, Workmen in and out. Cases with Ombudsman, Broadband problems for one month, a broken Foot and Hospital stay, then Crutches for 2 months. I think you get the Picture? There is plenty more. My many fantastic friends have kept me going (sorry I could not take you in my Suitcase) and here I am making the most of it. An other nice Dinner with the live Entertainment this time the Violin, Tabla and the Gatham (Claypot) used for percussion. I asked for my Ayurveda treatment to be brought forward as I wanted to catch a 3pm Lecture. I also went to the Taylor next door to the Hotel and ordered a pair of Black Trousers. Once again I paid over the odds but helped the local Economy. Checked emails and spoke to my Great Niece in Germany who had her 5th Birthday and I told her Elephants live in India and I found a Postcard for her.

9th Feb

What a strange morning. Woke up at 7am to some beautiful music. The Room was pitch dark because of the external Wooden Shutters. I sleep with the Torch and got up. Got ready quickly as I wanted to find the source of the Music. I was sure the sound came from the open Air Restaurant but when I got there the Waiter pointed down the Hill and said Church. I decided to go the long way round rather than do the many steps but when I got there it was empty but the sound still kept coming from nearby. I asked around but nobody spoke English and why should they? My sign language resulted in pointed Fingers and I walked and walked. Through an entire Village set in the Palm Forest. Stone Houses and Huts on either side looking a bit run down but very clean. Everyone here sweeps their front daily and also the Roads which results in Dust clouds. Gandhi once said India is a Nation of Sweepers. Eventually I found the source of the Music. A giant Speaker erected for tomorrow's marriage ceremony. The Guy was playing Cd's, What a let down. The Guy could not speak English but a College Boy appeared and translated. What I had heard was the first part of the Ceremony which is the devotional part. As I did not fancy walking all the way back I asked him to call an Auto Rickshaw. He made a call from his mobile which everyone has here and the Auto appeared a few min later. He wanted to jump in with me and he

introduced himself as Peter.(obviously must have worked in a call Centre where everyone gets an English Name) I promised to meet him tomorrow at the Gate at 8am as I am going to meet an old Friend at 8.30am. Originally from Germany, but now lives here and runs his own Resort. Now comes a funny bit. Peter and I decided to exchange Phone Numbers and I first played him my Music from the Uk phone. We try for a long time to phone each other but nothing seems to work. Eventually the Penny drops, I used the wrong phone. We both kill ourselves laughing. I explained that this is precisely why I have come to de-stress as I had an overdose of Stress which makes me do these silly things. By 8.15 am I am back for my Breakfast, still feeling stupid. Took all my Pills and decided to chill out . I brought several Ziploc Bags and keep all smaller items plus Fruit inside the locked Bag to avoid nasty surprises. I have seen several Gecko's in the Room. These are small Lizards 4-6 in long and they climb walls. They are harmless and good to have around as they eat all the insects. Despite no Aircom I have not been pestered by Mosquitos but I have seen some in the Room. My Gardener is outside sweeping the leaves and gives me a big smile when he gets his daily Tip. India is a place where I enjoy tipping and give more . I have mixed feelings about tipping in Western Countries. After Yoga I had my 2 hours massage straight afterwards as I wanted to go to the Lecture. It turned out to be very interesting. I decided to book a Car for tomorrow for 4 hours to go to the Capital Trivandrum, about an hour away. I have been there before and I have arranged to meet my Friends Mother who lives here and she has been to my House on previous visits. It was hard to explain to her on the phone that I wanted to stay on the Beach and not as a Guest in her House. I arranged to meet at an Hotel of her choice as I had so little time. I checked the BBC News on the Internet. I am starting to feel a bit cut off. No live Music tonight but a display of martial Arts, pity no music. After my return some Russian Tourists on a large Table decided to sing. Sounded ok to me. I am wondering if they brought their own Vodka? The German Tourists here are very quiet and stick to their Diet, I don't. I made my first attempt of writing Postcards , not usually leaving it that late, but I am getting very laid back.

10th Feb

Early start as Peter was at the Gate. I had promised him a special Pen in a Box which I gave him. I told him he could come with me for a ride at 3pm to Trivandrum which he was happy to do. At 8.30am Andreas came. He was dressed like a local Man as he has now lived here for over 10 years, so fully integrated. I last saw him 4 years ago but it seemed like yesterday. We caught up over Breakfast and I think I will stay at his resort next time. You can find it on www.thapovan.com He has an Exhibition at the Berlin Fair in March and I may go as my Niece lives in Berlin. She almost came with me this time but her daughter had her Birthday. After Treatment I got ready for Trivandrum and Peter was waiting at the Gate as local Boys are not allowed in to the Complex. I had permission for Andreas but as he is European I don't think I needed it. This is just a Security measure and I am sure locals can come in. First I met Mina's Mum over Coffee. It was a smart Hotel and coffe was 28Rupees, around 40 pence but on the Streets its only 3 Rupees. After our chat I did some shopping for presents but had to be careful as I had no place. That's the reason not everyone can get a present. Sorry!! Trivandrum is famous for Gold Jewelers and there are several Streets with nothing but smart Shops. No, I did not go inside. I bought more Postcards, 15 to be precise.Stamps to be delivered tomorrow by my Driver who works for the Hotel. On the way back I stopped at my Taylor, not ready which I suspected. At Dinner I saw many new arrivals , many Italians. At Yoga today I made notes and now have 8 Pages to copy. It is my Intention to do a mini Yoga session at home. Usual Powercut so could not finish Notes.

11th Feb

Today is the last full Day here and it is overcast. So is my Mood. Half of me wants to stay and half wants to go home. A lot of mixed emotions. Had a late Breakfast as I finished my Yoga notes. Went to my Taylor who was still doing the Button holes but all Tailors are like that. He did a good job when I

finally tried them on. More Cards to write and checked the Internet. Also booked the Car for tomorrow's Airport drop. Changed more money as lots of tipping on last day. My last Yoga went well and the Teacher gave me more notes. A very old friend phoned and will meet me at Mumbai Airport. He was in China when I was in Mumbai on 4th. His Name is Gopi and I have known him for 35 years. Most of my Friendships are between 20-50 years old as it takes along time for true friendship to mature but there are a handful of Friendships in the last few years who I have fast tracked. My last Ayurveda treatment includes a full facial and I cant stop looking in the mirror which I usually avoid. All the Shadows under my Eyes have gone. Could also be my healthy living but it certainly makes a difference. I have soaked up the view all evening as I am starting to pack and panic tomorrow at 6am, have set the alarm on my phone. Tonight last Veena recital. I love the Veena. When I started Dinner a young German Lady (at 40 you are young) came to me and asked if we could sit together which was very nice of her. We had spotted each other in the Lobby earlier but only managed a quick hello. Her Name was Petra. She arrived on her own today and it is a real pity I am leaving tomorrow as we chatted all evening about everything. We were on the same Wave lengths and even had the same musical taste. We knew all this just by looking at each other, strange sometimes. All this was later confirmed when she recommended a Book that had a great influence on her and I bought and have read it since and feel the same. She was definitely friend material. It got late and she was tired having only arrived today. Most People do come to Ayurveda each year and I think I will do the same. I hope I can convince some of you to give it a try.



12th Feb

Why did I panic? I need not have set the Alarm for 6am as I was packed by 7.30, than Breakfast, Crow stole a complete slice of Toast, and a last goodbye trip to the Beach. Tourists were settling for the day but its so big that it looked empty. The Fishermen were busy pulling in their Net. A few local Kids and People asked for my Name and where I was from. Than a big smile and they walked on. One Woman with her Fruit Basket on her Head spoke enough English to tell me I should buy a Pineapple so that she could feed the Fishermen. She started with 350 Rupees, about £5.00 and I shook my Head and walked away. When it came down to 100 Rupees(more than what I pay here in Uk) I agreed and let her make a nice profit, her lucky Day. She expertly cut the pineapple into perfect small slices, halved them and literally fed them a piece, so two Birds killed with one Stone. At the end of the beach was a Church set into the Hill. Again some very nice music was played and I sat for a while until it was time to get back. Saw Petra from last night and we sat and chatted for a while. The Author she had recommended was Paulo Coelho and I am ashamed I have never heard of him but he is Mega famous, I urge you to read "Like the flowing River" all short Stories. See www.paulocoelho.com and I have also bought a second Book and plan to buy them all. I paid the Bill, tipped and got into the Hotel Car. Airport check in was smooth and again a small delay. I could have checked through to London but wanted to change into Winter Cloth before boarding in Mumbai. Gopi had phoned and confirmed pick up. My Travel Agent called from Rajasthan as he had not heard from me to ask if everything had been as he booked it? I said yes, I was happy. I made more calls to my friends in India to say good bye, still plenty of credit for my next trip. Anu, my Guide also called to wish me a good journey. Arrived in Mumbai and my phone



rang. It was Gopi to say he was outside. My Luagge came quickly and I was out within minutes. I had text him to say I was wearing an orange Top but there was no need as we spotted each other right away, not bad after 15 years. Prior to that we had regularly met for 20 years. It was lovely to meet and time had changed nothing .His Driver came and we headed for the Gateway of India which is opposite the Taj Mahal Hotel that was bombed but almost repaired. The Gateway is by the Sea and thousands of People gather to watch a spectacular Sunset. Than we had coffee at the Taj, my last day treat. To give you an idea of the price difference this Cup was 280 Rupees and this morning it was 28 Rupees, that's why it was a treat. After that we drove to a very nice Chinese Restaurant on Route to the Airport. The Meal was excellent. I like Chinese in India best, slightly more Chilli hot and huge portions. Than back to the Airport and a farewell with a promise not to leave it 15 years again. Easy check in and a 4 hour wait. I could not get over the new Departure Lounge at the international Airport, possibly bigger than Dubai. I spotted the Bookshop and bought 2 Books by Paulo Coelho. I also bought the new Book by William Dalrymple as I read his previous Book. The Price was £20.00 printed for Uk market but here it was 400Rupees about £6.50. So if any of you plan a trip to India don't buy at Heathrow or Gatwick but in India as they have a large choice of Western Books at half the price. My Book was 250 Rupees and I started to read and continued on the Plane without any sleep as I could not stop. India is good for my Soul and I always leave it with a heavy Heart.

13th Feb

Landed at Heathrow Terminal 4 and got home to a mountain of Post and its catching up time now. Next day it was back to normal and it taken me hours to type this. Hope you have not fallen asleep reading this? Time to plan your trip!

Bon Voyage

Gilda Seabstian



