

Mumbai – Day 1

Mumbai, India - February 4, 2008

Naresh:

Our hotel room doesn't have an attached bathroom, but it does have an attached balcony with a view over Veer Nariman Road. Across the street is a cricket stadium. Down the road we can see the Arabian sea just a block away. Because Mumbai is a modern metropolitan city, and our side wraps in a big curve along the water way, the entire city reminds me much more of Chicago than it does any place else I've seen in India.

We had nothing scheduled, and so by the time we got out of our room and onto the street it was time for a late breakfast. We wandered around for a while in random directions and we're met with quite a few surprises: e.g., there are very big sidewalks and people use them (at one point I saw a cop tell someone to get on the sidewalk), there are no tiny auto rickshaws, no cows (many dogs, though) the streets are lush and green and trees are common, and the cars stop at stoplights. Yea!



We felt we could wander around for a while, and so we did. We ate breakfast (tea and sandwiches) in some small café called "Fast Food," and went a-wandering in the general direction of where we thought our friend Avi lived. We figured out how the local red payphones work (1 rupee per minute at stands that say "STD, ISD") and called Avi to meet her at 11:30, which gave us about an hour to walk toward her condominium.

Along the walk we continued to be impressed at how modern everything in Mumbai appeared, until suddenly it wasn't. One side of the street suddenly stopped being tiled sidewalks and raj-victorian-skyscraper architecture and became rows of tiny corrugated-tin and cardboard shanties with many people doing fish-related stuff, like drying small fish and preparing nets. The other side of the street didn't change, and after a few blocks both sides of the street were modern metropolis again.

After calling Amy's momma and shopping for assorted sundries (water, calamine, chips) in a small fancy store, we got up to Avi's condominium at the scheduled time and were treated to a terrific 15-th story view of Mumbai. We could see that we were surrounded by the Arabian sea. We could see the fishing village we'd passed on the way there; Avi explained that it was the oldest remaining fishing settlement, and the people refuse to move or change their ways or sell out, even though they're very poor and the land is worth about as much as an equivalent space in Manhattan.

Avi was terribly nice in greeting us, showing us around

the condominium, providing beverages and snacks, and telling us about the day she'd planned. She'd hired a cab to drive us around and she would be our tour guide for a day.

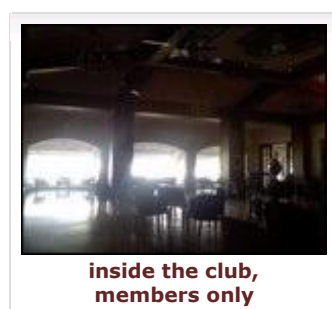


Cricket club

Our first stop was a cricket club at which Avi is a member. The club was an amazingly beautiful and upright establishment. It has a giant cricket field and stadium (turns out it is the one across the street from our hotel).

Tennis courts. Squash. Swimming. And many restaurants. We ate a fantastic Chinese lunch, delivered by starchy-white-wearing waiters in a posh restaurant with chandeliers and wooden pillars. Amy says it may have been the best meal so far in India, and it was Chinese.

I happened to have read in a magazine article about a week ago that if you want to see what life was like for the ruling class in the world of the British Empire, your only remaining option is to get into a sports club in India. We're very fortunate that Avi was a member and took us in. Thanks, Avi.



inside the club, members only

Next we drove through many parts of Mumbai with Avi providing commentary on the buildings and history and what went on there. There were a lot of rotary circles to drive through so it's easy to get turned around.



legal building, or victoria station, or something

Many of the largest buildings are very large and ornate, but many of them are also clearly not as well kept (at least on the outside) as they used to be. Avi explained that in many cases the same families have been in

apartments for 60 years or more, and the landlords cannot raise the rent and so they have no money to maintain the buildings; in the worst cases this leads to buildings occasionally just collapsing (in fact, yesterday's paper did have a story about a building collapsing last week).

Many of the buildings were giant Victorians from the British era. Other interesting buildings look almost entirely new, even giant skyscrapers, with a tiny appendage that looks like an old house—the story here is that by building these giant skyscrapers as “additions” to existing structures they're able to get around building codes or tax laws or something.



Video
Victoria Terminal

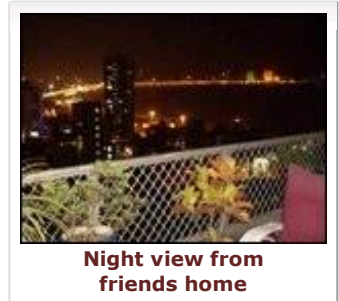


View from above

We also saw our first Zoroastrian Fire Temple, and were delighted to learn that Avi's family was a member of the

Parsi community: the descendants of the Zoroastrians

who had sought refuge in this area generations ago. Our Lonely Planet had said there was a small Parsi community in Mumbai, but I didn't know that we'd get to meet one, and in fact already knew one. From Avi we were able to learn some of the extremely ancient Zoroastrian religion, why there aren't many of them (they don't bring in new member nor accept dilution through most mixed marriages), and the history of their famed non-burials (leaving bodies out for the vultures to clean up) and why she thinks they made sense in the original Persian desert lands but no in Mumbai. (I didn't find out the full details of what is was that Zarathustra also sprach, or what that has to do with 2001 and space, but I'll have time to look into that later.)



Near one very commercial section of town traffic simply stopped, so we turned around and went to another club that Avi belongs to. It was tea time! A spot of tea and toast and little sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Cheers!



After tea we drove through some other sections of Mumbai we hadn't seen yet, then up to the top of Malobar hill, where her friends live in a Parsi-only building. On the way we saw the hanging gardens, which are nice but not especially spectacular. But I asked to stop there because for many years Amy had mentioned that one of her memories from visiting Mumbai 11 years ago was that the garden had an inexplicable giant shoe in it. So I got to see the shoe and verify that Amy is not a liar.

The view from Avi's friend's condominium at the top of Malobar Hill was fantastic. We could see the city out both sides of her apartment, and we stayed there through sunset and through her daughter's wedding videos that Amy made them show. Meanwhile they served us soda, spicy potatoey balls, small sandwiches (crustless, of course), and cake. I also spoke with the woman's son and answered questions about the US, where to vacation there, what jobs are available, and how to use Google earth. It was long past sunset and I'm very sure Amy did not want to leave her new best friends and her new favorite home.



But we did leave and were dropped off at the hotel by Avi and the driver she had hired (who was from Bihar, we learned) We figured out how to buy two hours of internet time and used it (the internet is getting better, but the bit pipe near Egypt isn't entirely unclogged yet) while we ate the chips we'd bought earlier in the day

and I smeared myself in calamine lotion. Another great day. Thanks, Avi.

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