



STOMACH TURNING PROWESS

I was warned that my 6-hour drive from Mumbai to Ahmednagar would turn my stomach - that every minute of the drive would feel like an hour. It did. I was warned that I should expect to see unusual things on the roads that would leave me thinking, 'what the hell?' I did. I was warned that Indian drivers, comparatively speaking, make Italians, who let's face it, are known for their *unrestrained* driving manner, seem cautious. They did. I was warned that I would want to consider covering my eyes if I ever found myself as a passenger in the front seat of a car. I did. Yes, I was most certainly warned!

All of this told to me, not in the spirit of criticizing Indians, but rather, to prepare me for my first encounter with, what was described as, especially bad drivers. Really?? Well, I can't say that a car trip in India isn't much like a stomach-churning roller coaster ride, but does that equate to bad driving or simply driving that we're unaccustomed to? The way I see it is that bad drivers would not survive for more than 5 seconds in India. Theirs are roads, from countryside to city, filled with, to some degree or another, a constant flow of mayhem! I, who relish the frenzy of 16 lane highways and driving my motorcycle a hundred miles an hour down the coastline, would not even consider getting behind the wheel in India. I'm good, but not that good!

No, Indians are in fact excellent drivers. What they may not be so good at is following the rules of the road, although I have to question if any even exist. If rules do exist, they are certainly not enforced, which is not surprising in a country where poverty is prolific. The priority, for an overwhelming percentage of the population, is basic survival. Enforcing road rules seems quite trivial in contrast.

Besides, if they started to really enforce road rules, like they do in the western world, would people actually be able to get anywhere? Let's not forget, we're talking about a billion plus population! In this country, while a privileged minority unquestionably enjoys luxury, roads and the mania they facilitate are strictly a means to income. Arriving at a destination in record-breaking time is a necessity, not a thrill.



Fade in.....streets infested with cars, trucks, busses, scooters, bicycles, rickshaws, oxen driven carts, pedestrians, pigs, cows, goats; vendor pushcarts laden with everything from spices to jewellery; everywhere beggars, tourists, taxis, monkeys, heavy equipment; work crews hauling cement in bowls on their heads, work crews napping on concrete under trucks stealing whatever bit of shade they can, work crews diverting traffic to accommodate road works; overloaded trucks stalled on the upside of a hill with blocks jammed behind their back wheels to prevent them from rolling backward, overloaded trucks toppled over on their sides in surrender to their excessive weight; six-way traffic on a one-way road, snake-pit like action on round-a-bouts, black oceans of rickshaws made for 3 people carrying 15...all of it, revenue oriented. So much so, that car horns take on an entirely different meaning in India.

If you stay in this picture and don't fade out, you can imagine streets saturated with a cacophony of relentless horn blowing - not the Louis Armstrong type - but rather the 'hey, I'm here' type. A horn is not just a convenience used to let another driver know they're annoying you in some way. No, in India, a car horn is an essential tool - as essential as the car engine in fact, because if you find yourself without a horn, you lose entirely your ability to communicate effectively with other vehicles and pedestrians. In point of fact, in a country where rear and side-view mirrors are often removed for their superfluity, 'Horn Please' signs mark the back of every single truck. Frankly, I can't tell who's honking at whom - it's not a language I understand - but it maintains traffic flow and it works beautifully for them. OK, now you can fade out.

With all that horn blowing, you'd think that there would be staggering numbers of irate people on the road. Interestingly enough however, not once did I witness any road discourtesy in India. To their credit, Indian drivers are very polite, in their admittedly 'get out of my way' sort of style. No finger gesticulations, no road rage, no cursing, no obvious stress signs at all really. Nope, we the visiting passengers may become, and usually are tense, but Indian drivers are admirably calm and in control.

The travel guides advise not to drive in India, but let me make it abundantly clear...yes, we should avoid driving in India not because the Indians are poor drivers, but because we are in *their* environment! They get by just fine without any obvious

road rules; it's we who need them. Think about it...a mere dysfunctional signal in the west causes traffic jams, stress, and brings out the worst in people. In India, a functioning signal would have the same effect. Personally, I have to give Indian drivers a whole heap of credit, because their driving requires a skill that is unparalleled in our side of the world.

I suppose the most dangerous aspect of driving in India, has not so much to do with the driving itself, as it does with breathing. As air-conditioned cars are a rarity necessitating rolled-down windows, the absence of any apparent vehicle emissions legislation is quickly apparent. It doesn't take long for your lungs to start screaming for fresh air, because the carbon monoxide is instantly suffocating. But then you do what the Indians do. If you're a man, you wrap a handkerchief around your nose and mouth, and if you're a woman, you hold a shawl to your face. It's not the healthiest option, but it works.

There's no question that driving in India is an unforgettable experience, but it's one that I'd be happy to repeat time and again. Perhaps it's all so exotic that I'm missing the obvious, but truth be known, I get far more stressed sitting in rush hour trying to make my way to work than I do travelling on the roads of magical India. I may not die of lung disease, but there's no guarantee that one fine sunny day, when that proverbial Sunday driver cuts me off, and pisses me off, that I won't die of cardiac arrest! But hey, thanks for the warnings!

