

Welcome to my Country!

This is what one of my hosts – the indomitable Ganesh said to me every time something unexpected would happen while I was living in Mumbai. And there were always things happening that were unexpected. It could be the internet went down and no one knew when it would be fixed...maybe later tonight...perhaps tomorrow...perhaps the day after... “Welcome to my country!” The laundry people refused to wash my questionable western underclothes... "How dare you insult our house!" cried Ganesh to the messenger...and as he turned to myself and Farouk rolling on the floor laughing- “Welcome to my country!”

The Wild and Wonderful

Living in Mumbai taught me patience. It taught me to appreciate a city full of colour, noise, food, and people just making their way the best they can like everyone else in the world. They were some of the friendliest people I have ever met. The regular people at the guesthouse included Ganesh who ran the everyday chores, cooking and sending our clothes out to wash. I also met Farouk Dhondy, a British writer, Indian Parsi and a very smart, funny and effervescent man. He taught me the history of Mumbai and made sure I went out for entertainment and socializing events. Ruby Vanderzee, an American writer, creator and doula befriended me as well. I truly value and appreciate the wonder of meeting so many different but like minded people.

As an independent person by nature, I prefer travelling with others and if that opportunity is not there I will just go off on my own. This caused some concern amongst the people keeping an eye on me because I would jump in an auto-rik and go explore. Mumbai is not the safest city in the world to do this. I was very lucky that most strangers would kindly help me if I looked lost.

I was stuck in an auto-rik at a traffic light with about 200 other honking vehicles, irate drivers and passengers, and hungry wandering dogs who

couldn't get out of the mire of a “jam”. No rhyme or reason to road rules in Mumbai, it has its own rhythm. My auto-rik driver was totally lost, so I leaned out and asked a passenger in the auto-rik next to me if they knew where my destination was – a FedEx location. Instantly, speculation arose from the passengers of the auto-rik, other people in auto-riks next to them overheard and also joined in on speculating where this seemingly obscure place was. My driver was chastised for not knowing where it was! An ever growing team of people starting pointing and giving directions. I have seen so many people invested in getting me where I needed to go. I had a semi-circle of 20 people making a sincere, friendly effort to make some sense in a whirlpool of chaos. Welcome to my country!

This type of sincerity and ability to stop and not care about any other distractions except helping another human being has always stayed with me. In our hectic “western” lives would this happen? Perhaps one or two would help, but I find in big cities such as Vancouver most people are happy to ignore everyone else and take on an attitude of 'that's your problem not mine'. I did get to the FedEx that day thanks to the kindness of others. When the light changed, everyone jumped back into their vehicles, the honking came back up to a full roar and the swarm of riks, taxis, buses and cars departed willy-nilly in all directions.

It was these small gestures I observed that stayed with me. Yes, I saw the Taj Mahal, I traveled to Goa with friends, took weekend trips and often went out with the lovely cast of creative characters I met there. My tolerance for others and my acceptance of the messy hecticness and unexpected interruptions that I encountered there has helped me greatly.

When I returned to Canada six months later I felt strangely unnerved. Where were all the colourful saris? There were no people drinking tea and chatting in the streets at 9 pm, no smells of incense, food or even the unpleasant burning smell of waste that some residents performed every night there. No one was phoning me to go out to god knows where after work hours, no crazy colourful taxis or honking. Not even a single dog

bark. Everything was quiet and still in my land and everyone was wearing shades of grey and black. Welcome to my country!

I fled to Los Angeles 6 weeks later.

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