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PEROWNE CHARLES COMMUNICATIONS

The ends of the line

Bypassing big cities for places barely touched by tourism, Stephen McClarence traverses the country by train.

The train judders to a halt and jolts me out of deep sleep. I peer out of the carriage window into the foggy night. On the final leg of a 3700-kilometre railway journey across India, we have pulled up at a station somewhere in Assam, in the north-eastern states. It is 3.05am. Under harsh overhead lights, dozens of people are sleeping on the platform, great lumpy bundles of bedding and shawls. I get up from my bunk bed, pad up the corridor of the sleeper carriage, a dark cave of snoring, and step down onto the platform.

The station signs tell me that we are at Lumding, a junction 64 kilometres or so south of the Brahmaputra river. Beyond the river are Bhutan and Tibet; to the west is Bangladesh; to the east, Burma. It's the far frontier of the Indian railway network.

Half-asleep fellow passengers fill their plastic water bottles from platform taps or drink tea poured from huge chrome kettles by wide-awake "chai wallahs". Stray dogs dart past, scavenging for food. A blast on the train's hooter warns us it's time to move on. We clamber back aboard and slowly the great caterpillar of carriages pulls off. My wife, Clare, is still sleeping peacefully in the top bunk, unaware of Lumding, and I'm soon lulled back to sleep by the lumbering rhythm of train-on-track, train-on-track.

Clare and I have been trundling across India for 10 days. We started at the most westerly station on the regular passenger network - Okha in the state of Gujarat, 160 kilometres down the coast from Pakistan - and will soon be pulling into Ledo, the network's most easterly station, a tiny Assamese town of tea gardens and coal mines. We could have done the bulk of this journey on one train, the Dwarka Express, but it runs only on Fridays. It sets off from Okha at just before noon and, more than 3200 kilometres later, pulls into Guwahati, the largest city of Assam, on Monday morning. Sixty-seven hours at an average speed of 48km/h. We love Indian trains, but not that much.

So we have staggered the journey over five trains, four of them overnight, with brief stopovers to draw breath. We're carrying the most luxurious toilet roll we could find and two bottles of cough medicine. It's been a steady journey. But as Gandhi once remarked: "There is more to life than increasing its speed."

The Saurashtra Mail from Okha to Ahmedabad

We have come at the tail end of the monsoon, flying from Mumbai to Okha's nearest airport, Porbandar. It's so hot and wet that clothes and bed sheets never throw off their clamminess. As we drive out of the airport, a Sikh soldier is huddled under a red umbrella dotted with pink rose designs. Old women and cows share trees for shelter; a man wears plastic bags on his feet in place of socks. Our young driver turns on a Bollywood soundtrack and honks the car horn in time to the music.

At our hotel, the unexpectedly chic Kuber, I trace our forthcoming journey on a railway map. As they snake across the broadest part of the nation, our five trains will take us to Ahmedabad, Jhansi, Varanasi and Guwahati before we reach Ledo, whose name no one seems to recognise. We will be far from the "metros", the great cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Calcutta, on which India's booming economy is being built. And - Varanasi apart - far away from the regular tourist trail and its prices.

We drive to Okha, past bullock carts and herds of goats, past peacocks, kingfishers and egrets. On the way I



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study a table of Indian railway statistics. Okha is one of 7030 stations linked by more than 64,373 kilometres of track and 130,000 bridges. Our train, the lunchtime Saurashtra Mail, is among 10,600 running daily, carrying 19 million passengers. Every day is like an exodus.

The station is the hub of this friendly little town. The lines continue a few hundred metres past the platforms and come to a full stop at buffers. Beyond here is only the Arabian Sea.

Dozens of people are standing on the platform and small, sharp-elbowed queues jostle at the reservation windows. The station master is sitting in his office, surrounded by assistants. "You speak English?" I ask him. He shakes his head. "You speak Hindi?" one of the assistants retorts with a smile.

I check the reservation chart pasted to the side of the train. Reassuringly, our names (and ages) are there, though Clare has transgendered into Clarke. I see we will be sharing our compartment with Shankar B Patel (male, 42) and Parag Vyas (male, 30). It's a chance to build up a profile of our travelling companions before they arrive.

Our carriage is airconditioned second class ("two-tier"), the second-most expensive of Indian trains' half-dozen classes. The most expensive is airconditioned first, which offers smart private compartments, but less opportunity to talk to fellow passengers. The classes ratchet down to basic unreserved second class: not recommended for the fastidious, but it's cheap.

"Two-tier" carriages are split into curtained four-berth compartments with two-berth side-seats across the aisle (46 berths all told). Our carriage is obviously new, with plum-coloured padded rexine seats, spotlessly clean lavatories and lightly tinted windows. Only one other couple is sitting here and there's no sign of Mr Patel or Mr Vyas.

There's a piercing whistle from the engine, the guard waves a green flag, and we pull off at a stately pace. A man in a dhoti sprints past to reach his moving carriage and the station master waves to me from his desk. The crowds are still there on the platform, waving off friends and relatives. We are on our way across India, from the edge of Pakistan to the edge of Burma.

The train crosses a flat landscape of palms and cacti and dazzling green fields. Camels amble past, water buffalo bask in rivers, shepherds in embroidered smocks and tight leggings keep watch over their flocks. Women in crimson saris carry huge bundles of branches on their heads.

Three hours pass, the train pulls into Jamnagar station and some sort of revolution seems to be taking place on the platform. People are storming our train, surging aboard and strewing marigold garlands over the next compartment. "Don't worry," says a young man in a designer T-shirt. Four senior army officers are retiring and a couple of regiments have turned out to wave them off. Their compartment looks like a shrine.

The young man is Parag Vyas. We feel we know him already from the reservation chart. He is taking boxes of confectionery to Mumbai from his "spicy snacks" factory ("Seven storeys," he explains. "One thousand square metres; 365 varieties.") For the next seven hours, our conversation ranges over recycling, the digestive benefits of sugar beet, arranged marriages versus love matches, the inequalities of India and his son's martial arts classes.



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"I like going by train," he says. "You can sleep all the time and when you reach your destination, you're fresh. Thirty-six hours is a very common journey for us. Go by flight and you are only three or four hours away from your work."

At Wankaner Junction, the fourth passenger joins our compartment: Mr Patel. He spends silent hours totting up figures on his two pocket calculators. I spot the words "Coal Cost Comparison" on one of his pads. We also have a few unanticipated travelling companions. A man perches on one side of Mr Vyas, with a young female paediatrician on the other. An older woman has sat down next to Clare and a mother and her son slump in silence on the side berth. Above them, on the top bunk, a fat man with three chunky gold rings sits cross-legged and stares down at us like a predatory eagle. Nine people in a space about three metres by two metres. We're in no danger of feeling lonely.

Nine days later: the Intercity Express from Guwahati to Ledo

After exploring Lumding Junction at 3am, I go back to sleep, wake four hours later and hear Mr Victor Toppo before I see him. He is talking in the next compartment, animatedly. Mr Toppo talks animatedly very well.

"People in other parts of India think Assam is another country," he says when he joins us. "One gentleman in Goa asked me: 'Do you need a visa to go there?'" He moves on to poetry. "Yesterday I bought Palgrave's [The] Golden Treasury, which I read as a child. There are many beautiful poems by great poets. Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth."

"We live with nature," says Mr Toppo, a young deputy bank manager, as he points out the Naga Hills, wound with scarves of cloud beyond the forests and tea estates.

He tells us that at one point the train will "bifurcate" and that the Assamese sell their best tea to other people, and "make do with the dust" themselves. I mention that we will be passing through an oil town called Digboi. "You know where the name comes from? British engineers used to say 'Dig, boy, dig; there's oil here.'" His station looms. "The small things I have told you may be of immense use," he says, shaking our hands as he leaves.

We are now in Upper Assam, a land beyond tourism. As we pull into Ledo, the train is almost empty. Its arrival is a daily high point for the station master, SN Saikia. He has two main-line trains a day to sort out, and four local ones. His office wall is covered with useful maxims ("Avail full rest before coming on duty ... Awareness and Alertness Alone can Avert Accidents"). Here at Ledo, he says, they see only about a dozen foreigners a year, most of them train enthusiasts and birdwatchers (it's a good place for spotting the chestnut-backed laughingthrush).

For this outer edge of India, we have a guide, Shishir Adhikari, a quiet man who guides us towards lunch on the verandah of a roadside cafe and then to the sights, or sight, of Ledo: the start of the Stilwell Road, heroically built during the Second World War to give Allied forces fighting the Japanese a route through Burma to China. It's beyond the tea estates over which coal-tips tower alarmingly ("Excavating happiness from the depths of darkness" a sign says). Tiny children coal-pick in deep puddles and load the coal into sacks they have to bend double to carry.

On the way back into town, we pass an abandoned stretch of line. A sign says it once served Lekhapani Station,



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for decades the most easterly in India - farther east even than Ledo - but last used in 1997. The station buildings have gone and only an overgrown wasteland remains, grazed by goats and edged by huts with lines of washing outside. The track just peters out, unceremoniously. After 10 days crossing India, we have truly reached the end of the line. Getting there London-based Ampersand Travel (+44 20 7289 6100, ampersandtravel.com) organises tailor-made travel throughout India. A 14-night tour costs from about \$3800 a person, including flights ex-Britain, transfers, accommodation and all sightseeing with a private guide.

For independent travellers, Indrail passes offer unlimited Indian railway travel for up to 90 days. S.D. Enterprises (+44 20 8903 3411, indiarail.co.uk) sells passes and can offer authoritative advice on train travel. Cooked meals can be ordered on most trains; hawkers sell food at stations and on board.

Jet Airways (jetairways.com) flies daily from Mumbai to Porbandar, Okha's nearest airport. Flights cost from \$129 one way.

When to go October to March is the most temperate time to visit India, though in airconditioning you won't be troubled by heat or monsoon rain.

Make sure you pack Toilet paper, a small towel, earplugs, locks and chains to secure luggage, patience and an open mind.

The Telegraph, London

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