

# A Winter's Tale of Travel 2020

With the beauty of hindsight you may well ask, 'Of all years, why choose this one to take off around the world?' Well, it started with an invitation to join friends from the American Transferware Collectors' Club on their February 2020 tour of India. Our own conversation then followed something like this; 'Well, if we're going as far as India, we might just as well ... Oh, and let's aim to circumnavigate wherever possible without flying.'

Mel's focus was family history; her father's War diary from India to re-trace, a Great-Great-Grandfather transported to Van Diemen's Land to track down and relatives in Alberta to meet. So we set to, researching, organising and planning itineraries that would encompass traversing Europe to Istanbul, joining the India tour, reuniting briefly with solo-travelling daughter in Nepal, visiting far-flung NE India, journeying on to Australia and New Zealand, moving over to Vancouver, crossing Canada, and hopping home over The Pond four months later. Great. Here's what happened ...

## Europe

Having received the joyous news from son that Grand-Offspring Two was expected, we set off for **France** (31 January - yep, Brexit Day). We traversed a very busy Paris (England v France in the Six Nations ... France won 24-17) bound for lovely Dijon, where we ate many crêpes and bought mustard from the proper shop:

*Found Dijon to be really beautiful; old, interesting, spotless and friendly.*

We crossed into **Switzerland** to take the three special trains up 'The Golden Pass' to Lucerne. There we visited the Lion Monument and magnificent Bourbaki Panorama, dipped into fondue and bought chocolate. On foot at 4.30 am in a lashing gale, we then caught our connection to the Bernina Express, which took us up over the Alps and down into **Italy**. We had snow and obscured views over the top, but it was very pretty. From Tirano, our Interrail tickets carried us on down the Sondrio Valley, along Lake Como to Milan, Bologna, and through to beautiful Florence, where we stayed with friends. Tourist duties here included a visit to the ancient pharmacy ([www.smnovella.com/en](http://www.smnovella.com/en)), art admiration and de-



*Dijon Mustard*



*Bourbaki Panorama*



*Bernina Express*

vouring Florentines. It was now 7 February; little did we foresee the epidemic which was about to strike northern Italy so hard. Not a bit ... and so in blissful, healthy ignorance we whizzed on down the length of 'the boot' to Brindisi; an important port for Romans and Crusaders:

*What a lovely place! Full of antiquity; archaeological sites, museums, churches, temples, monuments, columns, ancient pottery, mosaics and frescoes.*

From there we caught the overnight ferry across the Adriatic to **Greece**, on which we first witnessed apparent 'social distancing' behaviour shown towards Oriental tourists. We disembarked to catch three buses and a train across Greece to Athens, which took us along the coast and through mountains, with olive, lemon and orange trees a-plenty. We arrived to a full moon and view of the Acropolis. We walked for miles around the city, and can recommend the funicular railway up to the top of Lycabettus Hill for the 360° view. See e-Postcard from Freddy the Teddy (frequent correspondent) to Grand-Offspring One.

Somewhat defeated by the vagaries of winter ferry timetables and Greek/Turkish politics, we finally capitulated and flew on to Istanbul, **Turkey**, where we stayed for five days. This city was awesome and good preparation for our onward independent travel beyond Europe:

*Istanbul harder to navigate. Chaotic, busy, less English spoken. Very lively. Much trading everywhere.*

We used the ferries up, down and across the Bosphorus like the locals, with several long 'cruises' costing less than £2.50. We visited a huge, eerie basilica cistern and, preferring the Spice Bazaar to the Grand Bazaar, bought lemon pepper and teas of pomegranate and eucalyptus:

*The changing skyscape over our city view is wonderful. The call to prayer can be heard everywhere at various times of the day 6am to 6pm.*

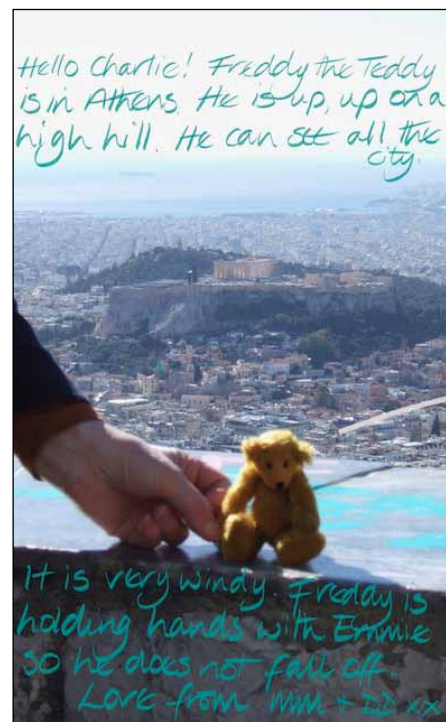
Transport to date included train, tram, funicular, cable car, bus, coach, taxi, ferry, much Shanks' pony – and one 'plane. It was time to join the land of the tuk-tuks, and so (15 February) we ventured on to Delhi to meet up with our American friends ...

## India Part I

While we were concerned that the tour might be an organised bubble of western comfort from which we would gaze out onto the real India, we also felt it would give us confidence to venture on to the War



*Ancient Pharmacy, Florence*



*Athens e-Postcard from Freddy the Teddy*



*Historic Tram, Istanbul*

diary sites in furthest Assam, and beyond. But, of course, it was actually fantastic. The focus of the tour was Indian scenes found on British transferware. For a detailed article on the India tour sites and corresponding pieces of transferware pottery, [click here](#).

Thus, in some luxury, we visited sites in Delhi, Kolkata, Allahabad, Varanasi, Agra, Ranthambore National Park, Jaipur and Bikaner. Where parts of the tour coincided with the War diary entries, in remembrance we were also able to retrace road, river



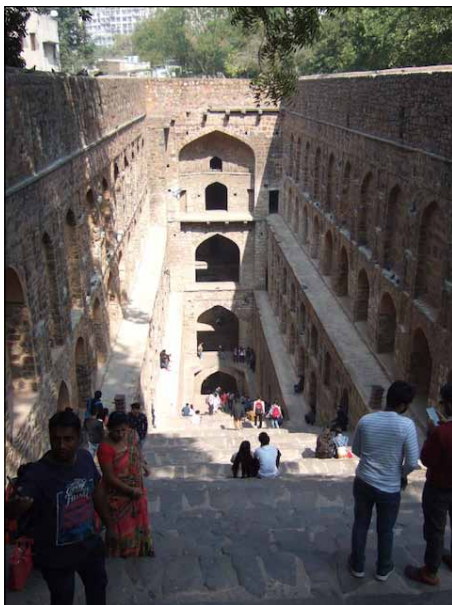
*Flower Market, Kolkata*



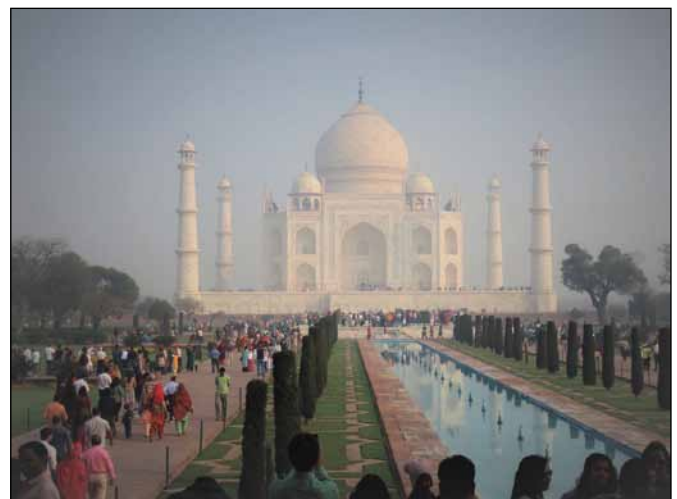
*Indian Scene on Transferware c.1830*



*Mughal Tombs, Allahabad*



*Step Well, Delhi*



*Taj Mahal, Agra*

and rail routes Mr Ted (Mel's father) had traversed himself in Pre-Partition India.

Outstanding memories include the Taj Mahal, which surpassed all expectations, and Varanasi - where we witnessed bathing in the Ganges, the burning Ghats and evening prayer ceremony:

*There is something like 70 Ghats here, nearly all for mixed bathing (caste, gender), a few for laundry and two for cremation. Saw one burning Ghat, many aspire to cremation here. Walked along the river – a cricket game in every Ghat – and through the maze of lanes. Fascinating ancient city and spiritual populace.*

Meanwhile (27 February), while making arrangements for rendezvous in Nepal with daughter:

*Getting concerned about spread of Coronavirus;  
hope it won't stop play.*



*Bathers at Dawn, River Ganges, Varanasi*



*Moo-terbikes, Jaipur*



*Mothers and Others, Ranthambore*



*Transferware Decoration, Old Fort, Bikaner*

## **Nepal**

We reunited for family time in Pokhara (3 to 8 March) beside the lake, beneath the leviathan Annapurnas. Activities included challenging walks, cycle rides, boating, lauding hang-gliders and supporting both the Gurkha and International Mountain museums.

The developing pandemic had its first impact on our plans here when we learned that the forthcoming joyous Holi Festival celebrations were to be curtailed (daughter was to have partied, showering in glorious coloured powders).



*Sunrise on the Annapurnas, Pokhara*

Once again, we parted ways and moved on to Kathmandu, where few took notice of the Holi ban and got merrily showered regardless. It was a spectacle. We managed a long hike in the national park to view the Himalayan range, and a final happy day visiting a local village, Khokana:

*We saw an ancient rapeseed oil process, carpet weaving, spinning, spices drying, farming, a school, carved wooden architecture and a baby-weaning ceremony. Also, sadly, much earthquake damage from 2015.*



*Coloured Powders on Sale for Holi, Nepal*



*Holi, Earthquakes & Mountains, Kathmandu*

With the news that international borders were closing, came an end to our Grand Tour as planned. We then faced a dilemma: to stay put and get stuck; to dash to Australia and have to isolate; to go home and admit defeat; or to achieve the India War diary objective, albeit with all visa entry now closing within 24 hrs. To salvage what we could of our plans we chose the latter, left Kathmandu a day early (12 March), and headed for Darjeeling just in the nick of time.

*Emotional farewells to helpful host and family, also to mountains and lovely people. Rigorous airport checks for both security and health, but empty 'planes and airports.*

## **India Part II**

Mr Ted spent the happiest days of his War in Darjeeling, enjoying some rest, travelling up to the hill station on the little Himalayan Railway. Just as it had provided respite for War-weary soldiers, so it became our brief refuge from the burgeoning pandemic. Despite the fact that our own journey on the Toy Train actually took eleven hours (wet track, frequent halts for sand and much chai, don't ask), it was a joy. Darjeeling was definitely chilly, but we managed to find specific sites recorded in his diary:

*Caretaker in Gymkhana Club very kindly let us in – it has remained an unbelievable time warp. Mr Ted danced and roller-skated here!*



*Main Hall, Gymkhana Club, Darjeeling*



*Roller Skating Rink, Gymkhana Club, Darjeeling*



*Mr Ted (very top), Tiger Hill, 1943*



*Sunrise on Kanchenjunga, Darjeeling*

We retraced Mr Ted's trip up to Tiger Hill (view-point for Everest), and the sunrise on Kanchenjunga from our room was a breathtaking sight.

We knew now we were on borrowed time with 'doors' hastily shutting, but we were reassured that Assam was still open and welcoming, so we rushed on to include Guwahati, beside the mighty Brahmaputra – the only 'male' river in India. Here, Mr Ted had waited for repatriation in the final weeks of

his War in 1945. We were able to visit Pandu Port, where he had been based, but a planned trip up river to the more remote Assam sites was not advised.



*Dick & Mel, Pandu Port, Guwahati, Assam*

With India's internal borders then closing too, together with a sense that, as Europeans, we were now considered a threat, our own repatriation was imminent. Having stretched it out to the limit, after an incredible seven weeks, we could go no further. We had hoped to visit Nagaland and Manipur where Mr Ted had written his diary entries amidst the Theatre of War, but Kohima War Cemetery, Imphal, and tiny Khongkhang up in the Chin Hills, together with our plans for the continents beyond, would all have to wait.

## **Home**

We would rather forget 18 – 21 March; the scramble for flights, closed facilities, cling-filmed duty free shops, daughter's grief for the world, son's concern for expectant wife and itinerant family ... But eventually we landed safely (to no apparent health checks) at LHR, and travelled home to Devon on a glorious Mothering Sunday:

*Beautiful spring day, lovely to see lambs, daffodils, primroses, magnolia and our green and pleasant land.*

Britain went into lock-down 24 hours later, and the sun did not stop shining for the next two months.

## **Postscript**

We remained in lockdown, finally reuniting as a family during mid-July. The UK death toll from COVID-19 by then was 45,000. With 'essential travel only' for the foreseeable future, resumption of our Grand Tour awaits ... Grand-Offspring Two arrived 12 September, now a pigeon pair!