

Christmas almost passed me by

By William Corden

I have just returned from a three week trip which took in the west coast of India, two ports in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia and finally the pulsating, booming city state of Singapore. No more than a smattering of Christmas decorations along the way and, thankfully no incessant Christmas muzak to grind us through the “festive” season.

I’ve been lucky this year, what with trips to Mexico and Japan to add to my educational enlightenment, I’ve barely had time to think before I’m packing my bags once more.

Early in the spring we decided on a two week break in Puerto Vallarta , a place where we spent our happy honeymoon some 25 years ago. Back then it was a little gem of a place, reasonably priced and still essentially Mexican. That was way back before the ravages of American franchises like Costco and Starbucks, before the mega hotel chains got a foothold before Covid nearly killed it off.

Now it’s got a brand new airport (where there isn’t a single water fountain and a bottle of water is US\$6) and the local businesses have jacked up their prices to get back the losses. The prices are now on a par with restaurant and supermarket prices throughout North America and apartment rentals/prices have seen steep, steep increases. It was not a pleasant redux and although I would cut them some slack if the average local wage had gone up in sympathy... it hasn’t, so that means we’re getting fleeced. The glittering hotel shown on the internet booking site was a dilapidated dump, photoshopped to make it look like the Hotel California... beware of booking on the ‘net.

But I digress I want to move on to the bigger questions of culture, governance, corruption that arise whenever you step

out of your own day to day affairs.

I've already written about my experience in Japan [Two weeks in Japan – New English Review](#) and you'll see from that essay that I was overawed by the politeness, cleanliness and efficiency, I can't stress enough how much easier life seemed to be under their stricter social system.

Why then is the Indian way of living so wretched, why when you visit a place like Mumbai do you say to yourself "what a shithole"? We arrived in hot sweltering Mumbai sometime after midnight and as soon as you step out of the airport the heaving mass of humanity grabs hold of your senses .

Everywhere you look, even at 1 am, is teeming with busy people. The cab ride to the hotel saw us pass by uncountable numbers of penniless beggars sleeping right on the street with not even a piece of cardboard underneath them or a cover to shelter them.

Many were young women with babes in arms and just as fast as you arrived you become inured to the sight.

Accepting abject poverty is just one of the things you must do if you want to see this city of just about 26 million souls.

There is no such thing as a free space because anything open is immediately filled by a street vendor who might have his cow or his goat for company , where they wash and shower or where they even eat is just one of those questions it's better not to ask.

Everywhere too is litter and garbage and although they have rolling garbage trucks on 24/7 routes there is no system around that could handle the detritus created by the endless trade.

You would think that in all of this clawing and scraping for a living that the people would have an edge of bitterness about

them but I found nothing but friendly smiles and their lovely head-nodding to show acceptance and warmth, it really was an enlightening feeling.

Religion is manifested everywhere and controls day to day habits and interactions, their religion seems (whatever sect it might be) to accept that whatever level you've been placed on this earth with, that's what you have to get through life with and maybe the next one will give you a step up the ladder to nirvana (who knows?)

Then we have the traffic; this system could only exist in an amusement park outside of India with incredible handling skills displayed equally by cars, motorbikes, tuk tuks and coaches vying for millimeters of space . All signals are ignored if there's an advantage to be gained BY ignoring them but within this dizzying action there is a patience afforded to pedestrians that allow them to hop skip and jump across traffic lanes that never, ever stop . At first you're terrified to cross but by marvels of adaptation you find yourself crossing like you were born in the place after an hour or two.

So we spent a day or two in Mumbai and got on the ship passing through the still recognizable colonial docks that were British until 1947 and still being used without a problem.

The Indians seem to have a different attitude towards the colonial occupation than the ones in North America. In talking to one or two of the more loquacious city inhabitants I found out that quite few are thankful for the legacy of the Civic system, the railways, the justice system, medical advances and most importantly the educational system.

Yes they were cruel and dictatorial but that was then, this is now. In my mind this was a wonderful attitude to take and allowed the nation to move on without wanting revenge.

Off we goes down the coast to Goa, it's Portuguese influence

firmly stamped on the buildings, roads, dockyards as far as you can see and on the complexions of the mixed heritage inhabitants, quite often stunningly beautiful.



What a heyday these years must have been to European powers of the time, just go in and take what you want and not a word of protest from the folks back home!

Then on down to Kochi, more of the same in a city of ONLY 27 million , it's all just a haze by now and you wonder how such conglomerations can ever be managed to make life easier... it's an impossible thought.

Next came Sri Lanka where as a babe in arms myself back in 1948 my ship , The SS Ranchi pulled in on our way to Australia, the family emigrating as 10 pound Poms along with 100s of thousands of others during that time. My name is on the passenger list so it must have happened. The details of the story are lost in family lore but suffice to say that my Mum just hated Australia and within three months we were back on the boat as UN-Poms and back into the poverty we had fled... go figure.

But, back to the trip. Sri Lanka was much the same as the mainland except there was a distinct laid back feeling about being there, the pace was slower , the people a bit more friendly, if that was even possible given the overall nature of their ex compatriots on the sub continent.

But by this stage of the game I'm no longer able to figure out where the hell I am.

Downwards towards the tip of the island to a place that was completely obliterated by the 2004 tsunami. Not even a trace of the death and carnage that took over 200,000 lives in one single event, just a serene ocean lapping onto a deserted beach where kids used to lallop around. Now it's the site of a new port being built by our Chinese friends.

Nothing much to report here except that the jungle comes right down to the waterline with nothing but the new dock breaking the plane.

Onwards we go with the impression that they eschew organization and planning in that part of the world, that sort of stuff is in the hands of the many gods they worship (and why not?). They don't let things like disposing of trash and litter upset their survival instincts nor do they give a thought to global warming or pollution...they just get on with it!

Now we start heading east across the Andaman Sea floating right over the two plates that shuddered against each other and created that awful wave. Standing on the deck it's hard to believe that such destruction could come from such a benign vista.

They say you wouldn't have noticed anything if the ocean pulse had passed beneath you that day but oh what happened when it hit land.

As we're leaving all of India behind we chug along towards Thailand, a place I've been to before and a place where I know the people are gentle sweet and friendly so I'm looking forward to this new, more laid back culture.

It hasn't changed one bit since I was there just weeks before the dreadful day and again you shake your head in disbelief at

the resilience of the people who lost so much; family members, children, property, business and yet here we are 20 years later and it's like it never happened.

The beach at Phuket was golden yellow, the sun blazing down in a perfect picture of paradise.

How the Earth can heal itself and yet political problems are insoluble?

Immediately you notice that litter and trash are under careful control, you notice that hygiene is higher up the list and you notice that nobody's in a hurry to get anywhere fast. You feel your entire psyche relax and slow your pace to match the rhythm...it just washes over you.

Lives here just like India and Sri Lanka are governed by religion and it is quite calming when you realize that in giving your life to a faith it takes away a lot of your personal responsibility.

America's Achilles heel I think.

Now I'm really confused as to where we are and as we pull into Penang in Malaysia, the mood changes ever so subtly to one of dynamism, pursuit of wealth and explosive growth. Penang still has more than legacy of British rule in fact the locals spoke better English than I do

I got a very real sense of a well educated, smart and polite middle class society.

No homeless on the streets, no beggars, and a very robust and well run social services system that looks after its underprivileged very well.

Somehow they manage to do this under the constraints of an unbelievably corrupt upper level political cadre.... but the thieves must leave something behind in their looting otherwise how do buildings get built?

Kuala Lumpur, the next city has to be the most fantastic place I've ever visited!

What they've achieved with their development and their architectural landmarks puts the Western world to shame.

Every degree of the 360 circle viewed from the KL tower has you gasping in admiration . How could they manage this with nary a mention on the nightly news, how could they do it with all of the fabled corruption? and yet there it is stunning your senses in wonder.

Just a bit further down the peninsula, Singapore hoves into view and it too doesn't disappoint. Compact, rich, safe... Well run on strict public behavior values and spotlessly clean.

The Marina Bay mall just knocks your socks off even after all the sights we've already taken in.

Again everybody speaks perfect English, kids get up on the bus or train and give you their seats without question. It's like a movie set village where you'd have no problem moving in.

And so the end comes, we're back on the plane to Vancouver trying to figure out why our own cities are plagued with drugs, business problems and social unrest, when we have so much more in the way of resources and social infrastructure.

One thing I can say is that it ain't my fault

That peninsula is 30 years ahead of us!