

FINANCIAL POST

Contract with India: Roads best not taken

Dodging goats, camels, the odd elephant ... and that's just the highways

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Passengers travel in a crowded suburban train at a railway station in Mumbai.

Financial Post Legal Post Editor Jim Middlemiss spent 18 days in India this month, exploring the outsourcing phenomenon. He travelled by plane, car, truck -- and once by elephant -- and returned with some tips on how best to get around the fast-growing country. Mumbai-based Jet Airways helped make his trip possible.

Somewhere between Brussels and Mumbai, it hits you: India is a heck of a long way from Canada, and if you're doing this flight with any regularity, then first class is the only way to go.

I'm on my way to Mumbai, Pune and Delhi to look into the growth of outsourcing in the professions and for a little rest and relaxation at the end of it all in Agra, Jaipur and the Ranthambore National Park. It will be a blend of international and domestic flights, combined with guides and drivers in a country that I had never thought much about visiting.

I'm lying stretched out in a single compartment, enjoying my headset, while some of my fellow travellers, wearing the Jet Airways-supplied pyjamas, snore up a storm.

I've kind of lost track of time, having left Toronto at 9 p.m. on a Saturday and landed in Brussels sometime the next morning, only to change planes and leave a few hours later and touch down in Mumbai on Sunday night shortly before midnight. Twenty-plus hours on planes and in airports is nobody's idea of a good time.

Fortunately, the Jet Airways team are all smiles and service is stellar, a nice respite from the growly air attendants that you often encounter in North America. That makes the journey

bearable, including the return leg, on which I rode in economy. Less leg room and the TV sets aren't as nice. Food was still good, though.

Eight months ago, this flight didn't exist, but India's largest domestic airline extended service to Toronto last August, providing Canadian business travellers with another option for reaching one of the globe's hottest economies.

It's a nice option compared with flying some of the other routes, such as Continental, which flies out of New York, but there's no shortage of airlines that will get you to India, with American, Air Canada, British Airways and Air France, among others, all flying out of Toronto. But flights aren't cheap, starting at about \$1,500 for economy and hitting more than \$10,000 for first class.

Using Brussels as its hub, a nice respite from the crowded Heathrow Airport in London, and Air Canada as its ground partner, Jet Airways now offers flights daily to Brussels and from there to three Indian destinations, Mumbai, Chennai and Delhi. From any of those cities you can easily hop a flight to anywhere in the country.

It's a good thing, because if you are relying on the roads to get around, it would take forever. What would be a two-hour drive in Canada can easily stretch into four or five hours in India. One minute you can be flying down a two-lane highway at 90 kilometres an hour, the next you're slowing down to dodge goats, cows, camels, the odd elephant or oncoming traffic. The road can go from a paved expressway to a ripped-up mess in a matter of kilometres. Never mind the fact that Indian drivers like to double the number of lanes there actually are, so a two-lane road quickly becomes a four-lane. Patience is a virtue, a driver is a necessity and road rage is not an option when traversing the country.

Trains are also an efficient but often crowded alternative, although watching people ride on the roof is a little unnerving. That also applies to buses. But then again it's also unnerving to watch five people on a motorbike, none of them wearing helmets, or the 10 or more people crammed into a Land Rover, including the one hanging off the back, perched on the bumper holding onto the door and the roof at the same time.

What's interesting travelling in India are the airports and the security. Unlike North America, no one gets into a terminal without a ticket, and passengers are allowed in no earlier than four hours before their flight. If you're too early for your flight, too bad, no entry. Your bags also pass a security check even before you get to the ticket counter

and will be checked again at least a couple of more times. Travellers are also checked multiple times before boarding, though it doesn't seem to slow the process down much, unlike here in North America, where you're checked really only once and it takes forever.

Domestically, flights run smoothly and the ability to board either end of the plane speeds up the boarding process, a luxury afforded a warm-climate country that can board people on the tarmac.

While domestic flights mostly ran like clockwork, with one even taking off early, India faces the same challenge as North American airports --lots of air traffic-- so planes didn't always land on

time. There was also a delay once while the plane waited for a Mig jet to pull off the runway. That's something you don't see every day -- shared services with the air force.

Factor in the brutal ground-travel conditions and travellers are well-advised to budget lots of time when travelling in India.

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