

Travel

BY MICHAEL MORRISSEY

Nothing to rail about

In a crowded carriage, courtesy and comfort prevail.

Behold the building. A massive Gothic castle teeming with defenders ready to dispense boiling oil and boulders on the invaders. Here, defenders and invaders are cut from the same cloth. The building, Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, is part of the busiest train network on Earth – in Mumbai, India. Every day between six and seven million people swarm through its labyrinth. The Indian Railway has devised a special vocabulary to analyse the stupefying reality of the compression – the press of people is referred to as a dense crush load, super-dense crush load or – as it peaks at 7000 aboard a train built to carry 1800 – a hyper-dense crush load.

I feel crushed just thinking about it. Every year about 3500 of these commuters wind up dead. Most, too impatient to use the footbridges, die crossing the tracks, hit by passing trains. (Later, I learn the main reason for this short-cut suicidal strategy is that platforms are often switched at the last minute.) A few lose their precarious grip from overcrowded doorways. If you wind up hanging onto the door frame, don't lean out too far – you could be decapitated by a steel pole embedded close to the tracks. If you scramble on top of the train you could be electrocuted by overhead wires or fall off and be killed. None of this deters the literal hangers-on in the slightest. Among the roof riders, one is reading a newspaper as though it were the most normal thing in the world.

All smiles: traveller Amita Chittora.

The pressure of the crowd is like a rugby test match on the move.

When I take out my camera to photograph the half dozen hanging onto the door frame, they smile at me encouragingly. Perhaps I would like to board? According to an article I once read in *Granta*, no matter how dense the crowd, room for one more will be found. All you need is strong fingertips. But that won't save you from terrorist attacks. On July 11, 2006, a series of seven bombs killed 209 commuters, injuring 700. In 1993, 250 were similarly killed. As I view the crush (super or hyper?), I am surprised no one is simply squashed to death through human agency only.

My mission is to buy a ticket to the town of Sawai Madhopur, close to Ranthambore National Park, where I hope to see wild tigers padding through the 1000-year-old fort perched on a cliff overlooking the 1300sq km park. At the terminus, it's like a refugee camp – thousands sprawl on the ground, the fiercely bright saris of the women thrill like staccato rainbows enhanced by digital technology. The pressure of the crowd is like a rugby test match on the move. Despite recently quenching my ever-raging thirst with a large glass of fresh sugar-cane juice, I am parched once more.

Now I must take my place in a queue at a window for foreign nationals – a window that took half an hour to find. After a young English couple have taken 27 minutes to make their purchase, I discover I need my passport to buy a rail ticket. For some odd reason, I have not brought it. A return trip and more glasses of sugar-cane juice are required. To my surprise, I find that my senior years entitle me to a



All aboard: always room for one more.

30% discount. The cost is a very reasonable 750 rupees (NZ\$26) for an overnighter.

Late April, over 40°C. I'm carrying luggage that feels as heavy and ungainly as a corpse. I put it atop my head, which prompts one Indian man to ask, "Why are you doing that?" Perhaps I have crossed the gender divide and am behaving like a woman? "Easier to carry," I answer. The train, immensely long and gentle as a blue whale, glides into the station so slowly, you would have time to cross its path without becoming a train fatality ... for a few seconds. After much questioning and many helpful answers

of small rungs proves trickier than you might think. It's worse coming down because you might accidentally trample on someone's face.

Across the passage a sharply beautiful young woman is reading a magazine. Soon our section has its complement of eight. It's a bit like being in a Guy de Maupassant short story – we are in the modern equivalent of a 19th-century carriage chatting to our travel companions – and as I am soon to be vicariously bunking down with the women, it seems the most natural thing in the world to get acquainted. The beauty – Amita Chittora – has the most advanced English. She is a fashion designer, and like the rising class of young professional Indian women, wants career first, babies later. She is single. So too is the young man – Sumeet Saraf – who works in computers. In fact, they are the same age – 25 – and come from the same small town of Koti. Because she is the daughter of a doctor, she says, "everyone knows me", her laugh revealing perfect teeth. I am struck by the young couple's good looks, courtesy and open manner towards me, which is bereft of the patronising hostility the young often accord the old. Perhaps it is the traditional Asian respect for the aged. Obliging, they speak mainly English for my benefit, even when conversing with each other.

The train takes off so gently I do not even notice. Initially, our speed is low, but as we emerge from Mumbai into the dried-out countryside, it accelerates to 120km/h. Because of the wide gauge, it's a very smooth ride. The ground looks like desert. "Agricultural lands," Sumeet informs me. "Wheat, cabbages, cauliflowers." I am sad when Amita and Sumeet alight; by now they feel like friends. I wonder if they consider themselves a handsome couple in the making. I am sure other "arrangements" have already been made. A family with three young boys board the train and the process of getting acquainted starts again.

It's a shame I missed the passing of the steam age. Back in the 80s, big steam locomotives crossed the Indian subcontinent. Now they're almost universally diesel, though a few tourist-oriented steam trains survive – most notably those in the tea-plantation town of Darjeeling. At 63,230km long, the system in India is the most extensive in the world after the US, Russia and China. Indian Railways, however, is the largest employer in the world, with 1.4 million people on its payroll – even more than Wal-Mart. One of them checks my ticket in that formal, slightly gruff way that train conductors have. It is all in order. I sleep like a babe. ■



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Day 3



Day 2



Day 1

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