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‘Strange Times’

If you'd asked me last year how I thought 2020 would play out my answer would have been way off the mark. Other than the pandemic, one thing I wouldn't have anticipated was my trip to India. My fiancé had planned a holiday with one of her friends and it wasn't until around three weeks prior to their departure that I decided to tag along. The main reason I went wasn't because I wanted to see India so much, it was more that I was worried about them. My fiancé, Jee, is street smart but I was still afraid that she might come across some trouble. I went as a protector, which is ironic considering I had my first ever panic attack over there and it was Jee who navigated me through it.

I was living in Thailand at the time. When I emailed my mother to tell her I'd decided on a whim to go to India, she was heavily opposed. She'd lived in India before, working with Mother Theresa's nuns, and she loved the place, but she was afraid that I'd get stranded over there because of the virus. She informed me that things were changing rapidly and if I was going to go anywhere it should be back to Australia.

I eschewed her advice and headed to India on February 29th, the day before my birthday. We arrived in Delhi and the culture shock kicked in immediately. I'd been told by a friend that India was hectic, but having lived in Bangkok for many years I figured it wouldn't be too different. I was wrong.

Delhi made Bangkok seem like Melbourne. The traffic wasn't just chaotic, it was suicidal. I'm a big fan of orderliness and no matter where I looked I saw no signs of it on the roads. Drivers didn't wait for space to appear, they nudged their vehicles into any openings they could find, no matter how narrow. It was like watching crowds rushing into a Black Friday sale. The rickshaws weaved a frenetic tapestry and their incessant beeping drove me crazy. By the time we'd arrived at our hotel I was ready to head back to Thailand.

"Keep calm and go with the flow." This is what a friend of mine who had travelled to India had told me. It was his only piece of advice when I'd asked him for tips. I gradually took it, but there was more than just the lethal traffic and cunning scams that I had to come to terms with. There was also the specter of Covid-19. Back then it hadn't grown into the global pandemic we all know and love today, but it was still a major concern. Thailand was the first country it struck outside of China and I thought that India would be free from it, at least while I was there, but it seemed to have followed me.

When we left Delhi and arrived in Jaipur, cases popped up in Delhi. When we left Jaipur and arrived in Agra, cases popped up in Jaipur. When we left Agra and arrived in Varanasi, cases popped up in Agra. I began to suspect that maybe we'd been the ones spreading the virus but then

we heard on the news that an Italian tourist had taken it to Jaipur and an Indian man had taken it to the Taj Mahal in Agra.

The virus was being spread by tourists and being one myself meant that I was visiting all the same attractions these carriers were visiting. This thought, coupled with the Hell ride that is traffic in India, is probably what contributed to my first panic attack. It struck me when we were in Varanasi, along the River Ganges, the one place we were free from traffic. The setting was calm, which is apparently when panic attacks are known to strike- once the cause of the stress is gone it gives the anxiety room to breathe.

I didn't know it was a panic attack at the time. If I'd been able to identify it I would have probably been able to calm myself down. To me it felt like I was having a heart attack. I couldn't breathe properly. I started to hyperventilate. I wanted to go to a hospital but the thought of traveling through traffic to get to one made me panic even more. Luckily Jee saw it for what it was and took me to our room where she guided me through some meditation techniques that brought me back to normal.

After Varanasi we headed back to Thailand on the 9th of March. I went back to work for a few days but then my company sent everyone home because of the virus. My work visa was set to expire on April 7, which meant that I would need to leave the country by that date. I booked a flight to Melbourne for that night and sent an email to my mum informing her that I'd be heading down under. She replied by saying that I needed to get out of Thailand sooner because the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade had just warned all Australian citizens overseas that they should

return to the country ASAP, as there was a high chance that it wouldn't be possible to do so in the near future.

Once again I ignored my mother's advice. I had faith that my flight wouldn't get cancelled. April 7 was only a few weeks away, surely things wouldn't change so drastically in such a short period of time. At least that's what I fooled myself into thinking. In reality there were other things that kept me from rebooking an earlier flight at that point. I wanted to wait until the end of the month so that I could get my final paycheck, I needed to pack up my apartment, and I wanted to spend more time with Jee.

Some groups online were saying that if flights were cancelled it would be possible to get an amnesty letter from respective embassies, which would then make it possible to get a visa extension from Thai immigration, from within the country. I called the Australian embassy to find out if this were true and the guy on the phone basically accused me of trying to stretch out my holiday. He was very reluctant to tell me that it could be done.

My flight on the 7th of April ended up getting cancelled. I rebooked for the 31st of March, which would have had me arriving on April Fool's Day in Melbourne, but that flight got cancelled too. All of the other flights were quickly being filled up or cancelled but I managed to find one on the 21st of March. This gave me one day to get all my affairs in order. Not nearly enough time.

Jee packed up my apartment for me and settled things with my landlord. I left her in Bangkok, thinking that I'd only be gone for a month at the most. When I arrived in Melbourne I was required by law to go into 14 days of quarantine. Luckily I got back just in time. If I'd arrived a few days later I would have been taken from the airport to a hotel where I would have been stuck

in a claustrophobic room.

The Australian border closed shortly after I got back. The same thing had happened in India soon after I'd left there, making it so that I'd only just been able to get out. The borders also closed in Thailand around the time I got back to Australia. I remember thinking at the time that since the 29th of February I'd been rushing from one place to the next as though I was being chased. Getting out of one country and into another was akin to running for a train and making it inside the carriage just as the doors were closing.

I've since heard many horror stories where expats who had crossed borders into neighboring countries to do visa runs became stranded. There are tales about people who went into Laos and were then knocked back when they tried to reenter Thailand, even though they had the required visas. Where they would go and what they would do, I don't know. Many of them would have had families in Thailand. All of them cut off.

It's now been five months since I left Thailand and it doesn't look like the borders are going to reopen anytime soon. I've gone from racing from country to country to now being trapped in my own, much like my convict ancestors. From a sudden burst of nonstop traveling and activity everything has suddenly flat lined. I'm now coasting along in the one location in this bizarre blursday limbo.

As much as I miss Jee, I'm glad I made the decision to return to Australia. If I'd stayed in Thailand I would have been able to get a visa amnesty until September but I wouldn't have been able to get a job. Repatriation flights are rare and exorbitant so I would have been in quite a bit of strife.

Since returning to Australia I've been writing a diary detailing the changes in everyday life during this strange new era. I send the entries to Jee via email each week. My hope is that the diary will end with our reunion, but my fear is that life will lead us along a different path. I know that there's nothing to be gained from worrying about what might happen but that doesn't always stop me. All I can do at this point is try and take my friend's advice: Keep calm and go with the flow.

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