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‘So ... was there meant to be any water in this waterfall?’

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

I burst out laughing as my two travel companions and I stared, dumbfounded, at the vertical slate of bone-dry rock. We had caught an auto rickshaw for a jolting hour outside of Ooty, a former British hill station in state of Tamil Nadu in India, in hopes of seeing what was supposed to be an incredible display of rushing water over stone, complete with a bridge for clear observation. Instead, we were met with a few planks of wood that splintered off halfway across a pathetic ravine, and a very dry piece of granite looming over it.

“No expectations, no disappointments!” This had been our mantra from the first day of planning our India trip, and we had been repeating it to ourselves hourly since arriving. We had grown accustomed to the riddle of travelling India— best summed up by the infamous Indian head bobble, the meaning of which varies from ‘yes’ to ‘no’ to ‘who knows’. If the sign says ‘Bicycles for rent’, the hotel only has one bike, and the rear tire is missing. If the hotel advertises hot water, you can expect to spend your showers shivering under a cold dribble. If the menu features avocado lassis, avocados are definitely not in season and



Men wave as they ride in a truck to a religious festival in Ooty, India.

perhaps you’d like a plain one instead — which, it turns out, are a bit of an acquired taste.

Despite the excess of both trial and error, the month we’d spent in India had been incredible. From the 45-degree sweatbath we endured in Rajasthan to the surprising chill of the Nilgiri mountains in the south, we marvelled at the painted faces of elephants as we swayed up towards fortresses atop their backs, ogled the ever-changing natural landscapes out of sleeper class train windows, flung

ourselves down remote desert dunes in jumping competitions with the locals, and accepted every last sight, sound and questionable smell that India thrust at us.

I had been careful not to show a hint of frustration until a few days before the waterfall fiasco. I considered myself to be a rather experienced backpacker. At age 20, the number of countries I had travelled to trumped the number of years I had been alive. My friends could argue with Indian hotel management over inflated

masala omelette prices but I would remain stoic behind them, my nose buried in the Lonely Planet as I meticulously planned how to get from one city to the next.

That’s why I even surprised myself with the small outburst I had at the train station as we were leaving Bangalore for Ooty. A lengthy and confusing conversation at the booking desk had led to us being unable to purchase anything but platform tickets, which we knew would result in us spending the 12-hour overnight train sitting on the floor in the open door frame, next to the latrine, with our feet dangling out over the rails.

I had this recent ordeal in mind as we loaded back into the auto in Ooty, post-waterfall failure, and started the jarring drive back up the mountain. We didn’t have much time before we needed to make it back to the airport in time for to catch a flight up north. The auto rickshaw stalled, sending my stomach up to high-five my tonsils, as the traffic around us began to thicken. We were becoming enveloped in a mass of chanting pedestrians, clothed in white, their foreheads streaked with powdery red, flanked by thick-necked cows oblivious to their inconvenient placement on the narrow road, with dozens of approaching automobiles all honking to express their desire to pass us. Our driver pulled over.

“Festival,” he grunted. “Very busy.”

I stuck my neck out the open side door and saw a flock of 20 or so young men also wearing white, all piling into the back of a single pickup truck, no doubt being transported for the purpose of the festivities.

As their truck gathered speed, the crowded trunk was soon parallel to my seat in the rickshaw and I looked up to see one of the young men reaching out his hand for a shake. I instinctively met it with mine. He smiled, revealing teeth that gleamed Taj Mahal-white against his tanned skin. The possibility of missing a flight vanishing from my mind and I grinned back. Our hands broke apart as the truck distanced itself, dust clouding over the arms of the men as they continued to wave.

That mutual grin, shared so frequently with waiters, rickshaw drivers, shop owners, hotel reception, food vendors, and bathroom attendants alike, is the true intoxication of India. You may not agree on a price; they may not understand you; they may not help you, and in fact, they may even laugh at you, but when your eyes meet and you feel the sides of your mouth curve upwards in spite of any other emotion coursing through you, there is an understanding: you are in India, and you are happy that your paths have crossed.