

August 2022

My last email was sent just short of my birthday. Life slowed down slightly since, but with a few of you heart-warmingly inquiring about the whereabouts of this email, I've finally reflected on the last two months. But first, I've updated my lockdown pet project and bought <https://www.visafree.in/> again. It now allows you to filter based on what visas you already hold alongside a few stylistic changes – Indian passport holders are urged to check it out 😊.

Associated Media: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/WagmJTYdYJXxoYPAA>

Spontaneity in the Peak District

Sunny, dry days are a treat in Manchester. This final week of August has had more than its fair share, and I'd only somewhat made use of the weather. With the days already getting shorter, I decided to venture out to the Peak District National Park but swapped out hiking for cycling.

Starting in Buxton, I filled up my water bottles from a fountain in the town square. This fountain is meant to be connected to the same source that the commercial Buxton Water operation uses, and it certainly tasted quite different to Manchester's. Initially cycling along a 50mph mountain road, I had to pull over rather frequently, to both let traffic pass and catch my breath.

Eventually, I turned off onto a single-track road which meant traffic was non-existent. That's where the ride got dreamy: my slow climb along the main road now let me coast down to a reservoir, following a stream and going through dense forest. Unfortunately, I soon bottomed out and had to begin climbing again, this time on gradients exceeding 15% at times, and over 12% on average. After much effort, I peaked, took a quick look at my map and carried straight on, once again enjoying the thrill of speed and wind in my hair. Reaching a plateau, I was dismayed to find my map app had gotten stuck and I was in fact meant to have turned off rather than carried straight on. Not wanting to climb again, I attempted to use public footpaths through farmland along a contour line to intersect with the road I was meant to be on. It was tough going, with sheep particularly skittish. Eventually a farmer approached me and advised it would only get worse from there on and so about 40 minutes later, I was back where I'd started and begun the slow walk uphill.

Naturally, I reflected on life as my legs burned. Given the amount of work I'd done to get up, it really would have been prudent to check the navigation app more thoroughly than a quick glance. Also, climbing back up was harder than the first time around, slightly because of fatigue but mainly because of reduced willpower. Hopefully, I'll remember to pause and check at the next peak in life, but on this occasion the story ends with me gently coasting along the back roads feeling like a Bollywood main character until the train station rolled in to view.

Work and a new address

I'll be starting work very soon, and to be honest, I haven't a clue what I'll be doing – here's to hoping it's exciting. I thankfully managed to sort out a place to stay, and from the 11th of September, I'll have a new mailing address:

Flat 28, Van Gogh Court, Amsterdam Road, London, E14 3UY

It's a nice 1 bedroom and has a spacious living room so let me know if you want to come visit :) – just don't ask about the rent.

A trip to India

Family holidays have been difficult as of late with travel restrictions followed by limited overlap of free time. Historically, even when timing has worked out, destinations within India have tended to be favoured to account for my parents' dislike for longer flights and food preferences. Although vacations of that sort tend to be lighter on adventure, they're nonetheless very welcome. July involved a good three weeks of "working" on my dissertation from "home" whilst I went back to Dubai and then on to India.

Getting to Delhi, we had some time to tour around India Gate and the National War Memorial. The latter was more striking not for what it had, but for the slabs of granite left blank to be inscribed in the future. Heading on to Udaipur the next day, we experienced Vistara's service. The airline's name means "Detailed" and was also favoured by Udaipur's royal family: the prince, princess and their child were on the same flights as us to and from Delhi.

Our journey with the royals continued as the first hotel we stayed in is in a part of the Udaipur City Palace that remains in use. The hotel is run by the Taj group, which has consistently offered the best luxury I've experienced, and this trip certainly continued the trend. Opting for all meals included, we ate to our hearts' content with chefs planning ahead with my mum to cater to her dietary requirements such that no compromises were made. Having tried all the Rajasthani cuisine, we opted for sushi after a few days. Whilst the sushi was excellent, this was not why the exercise proved to be a highlight. My dad was having it for the first time and decided wasabi would be like mint chutney. The normally reserved waitstaff dashed over to provide an urgent recommendation but naturally, tears soon followed.

We soon sailed across Lake Pichola to spend the rest of the trip at the aptly named Lake Palace, built on what was once a hill. Even for the Taj group, standards were high. A shower of rose petals welcomed us (well, my parents) as we walked from the jetty to the main entrance, and dinner was served with silverware in earnest. Recreation included plenty of sailing around the lake. The evening sun was striking Gangur Ghat – the filming location of a dreamy drama film *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* – with locals swimming and making merry to Arijit's *Kesariya* in the background. Sailing past the scene will remain how I remember Udaipur [video in album]. I endeavour to be able to afford luxuries such as staying in the sort of establishments my father has treated us to, but it is calming knowing I found happiness in the simple pleasures of life as well.

Soon after, we sailed then flew then drove eventually reaching Panipat, Haryana where India's first modern ethanol plant was recently inaugurated. Rather than the plant though, I was there to meet family for the weekend. I felt drastic changes with the job on the horizon - my grandmother no longer spoke about marriage in jest and even pulled the mortality card. For the first time, my grandfather recounted some of his own time at university. I hope to be able to visit frequently. The subsequent departure of my cousin for university left them sad in a way I'd never seen before [picture in album].

Ms Chandak's deep dive

For an initial conversation, Saloni got me thinking- allegedly in retaliation to me inadvertently having done the same previously. I ended up vocalising how growing up in Dubai fundamentally shaped my views and ambitions.

Living away from extended family, only a limited bond was able to form. My grandparents rightfully did not get emotional when I left for university like when my cousin did. Add to that the churn of interpersonal relationships I faced during boarding school and to an extent in Dubai, and my simultaneous desire for stability and relative acceptance of change as drivers in making decisions can be explained. Those of you who know me may have raised an eyebrow wondering about how this account fits in with my generally social outlook. Like I said, I do crave that stability but have come to not expect it.

Unmistakably, I felt my heart race

But it wasn't love. Instead, I suppose it was dread about facing the UK Border Force despite knowing I was all in the clear, compounded by disembarkation being halted for security reasons.

This was the first time I'd crossed an international border whilst wearing my smartwatch, and the results were unmistakable. Not only did I feel anxious, my heart BPM went through the roof, slowly recovering over the hour after leaving the airport. To an extent, this leaves me feeling frustrated – I know everything is in order for me, so why am I unable to rid myself of these unnecessary spikes in stress? I reflect on the fact that Dubai is the only port of entry where I feel nothing of the sort. Perhaps home is where the heart is (at ease).

More generally, border restrictions keep me humble (read frustrated but accepting). From being hassled at the Danish border recently for having an Icelandic issued Schengen visa to having to cancel plans because of rejected visas, my stories will join a long list. A silver lining is these experiences helped me realise my privilege in every other facet of life.

Recent articles in the Guardian [“Only a country as complacent as the UK could give up its border privilege so easily”](#) and Fodors [“You Think Flying Is Stressful Right Now? Try Traveling With an Indian Passport”](#) echo these views.

Trying to accept reality may have been a driving force in creating that map of visa requirements in the first place. If Europe, for example, is arrogant, I suppose I ought to go to Morocco and Uzbekistan instead (read: come with me).

Birthday Celebrations

Occurring just after my last email was sent, I was finally able to throw a large birthday party after two years of limited options. Though there were a few notable exceptions, I felt blessed to be around so many people that found happiness in mine. A highlight for me was to ask every attendee to share stories from shared experiences. It was a fantastic way for me to gain some insight into how I was perceived for one thing, and I wish I'd recorded the event.

Something that appeared to strike a chord was when Curtis, my flatmate, brought up efficiency. Several others chimed in with their own examples of having observed me take (perhaps unconventional) steps to ensuring I made the most of the resources available to me. Whilst some comments were perhaps made with a touch of scepticism, it somewhat baffles me that on average, people might not strive for efficiency. It's a view on which I tend to find a lot of common ground with other physicists.

Can we actually decarbonise?

Adya asked me a question along these lines, and I ended up going off the rails and writing up [a three page paper to answer it](#). I'd encourage giving it a read (but of course I

would, ask Adya's if she recommends?). It considers technical limitations, the ignorance of leadership, and societal expectations.

To illustrate the effect of societal expectations, I take Jasmeen's example. She called me out on my backpack ripping in a few places. So far so fine, it definitely needed seeing to. When I went home, I requested my mum to help and she patched it up for me after much insistence I did not wish to purchase a new one. Several weeks later, Jasmeen and I meet again and she again inquires why I haven't replaced my backpack, rather unsatisfied with the patchwork.

Like with my views on efficiency, I am rather proud of my obstinance with certain decisions. I doubt I'm always right, but I expect I frequently optimise for time, money, environmental impact or a related parameter. Not everyone is as obstinate as me, and in general, social networks are powerful drivers of change. Reflect on which way you are pushing society.

Desiring to desire

Gautam Agarwal

31 August 2022