

Chapter 5: Domestic Travel

India is a very large nation, so for a travelling executive it is important to understand how best to get around. The basic options of air, road and rail are familiar to any traveller. However, the visitor needs to be aware of the time involved in road and rail travel before expecting to rely on these for transport to an important meeting.

From Srinagar in the north to Chennai in the south is approximately three thousand kilometres (1900 miles), comparable to the entire Eastern seaboard of the USA. Even the distance between the financial centre of Mumbai and the technology hub of Bangalore is a considerable 1000 kilometres (620 miles), a similar distance to the drive between Charlotte, North Carolina and New York City.

Air travel is clearly the option of choice for most visitors to India; however I have outlined information on the rail and road networks for those with a little more time and possibly a desire to see India far from the madding crowd.

Air Travel

Until 1993, domestic air travel meant buying a ticket for state-owned domestic operator Indian Airlines. However, for the past decade, the skies have been opened up to private operators.

Two major players formed in the wake of the government reforms in 1993; Jet Airways and Air Sahara. Jet Airways now has a 45 per cent share of the entire domestic air travel market in India, comparable with that of Indian Airlines. Air Sahara mops up most of the remaining section of market share.¹ There is now a shift to the low-cost point-to-point airline model that has opened up the skies to travellers in the US and Europe with Air Deccan already airborne and other airlines waiting to take off soon.

In his book, *India Unbound*, the writer Gurcharan Das gives a picture of how domestic travel operated in India prior to the reforms. In 1982, while working for Richardson Vicks in Mumbai, Das was summoned to New Delhi by a government official who wanted to discuss an application to market a new product. Das recalls: "He insisted that I rush to Delhi immediately. Indian Airlines, the government monopoly carrier, used to run only 3 flights a day to Delhi, and seats would get booked weeks in advance. So it was not surprising that I was 182 on the waiting list. (Ten years later, after the reforms, there are twenty-two flights daily run by three airlines on the same route.)" ²

However, though market reform has taken a brush to the lack of supply, Indian airports are still shocking in their lack of basic amenities. The facilities have changed little in the past decade, though more airlines are operating from the same airports and require basic infrastructure, such as check-in counters. Executive lounges and fast-track security are not always available, no matter how much extra you spent on a business class ticket. Where such facilities do exist I have been refused an extra drink or sandwich beyond the one "free" snack. Try explaining that your business class ticket has a premium over economy that is worth much more than a single lousy sandwich and you are likely to be greeted by a stonewall of bureaucracy. A breakfast I recently 'enjoyed' at the Delhi domestic terminal reminded me of an old episode of 'Prisoner Cell Block H'.

Security and immigration (at the international terminals) seem to be organised by supervisors with no knowledge of how best to utilise their resources. It can't be that difficult to estimate the number of passengers passing through a terminal each day and academics have decades of research in how best to utilise a checkout line, yet everyday at every Indian airport you will witness hundreds of passengers funnelling into a single or double file just to pass by an uninterested official. Queue-jumping is endemic and is never addressed by the security staff, so there is little incentive to remain in an orderly line - think of a rugby scrum and you get the picture. If you are not a patient individual then do pack the St. John's Wort.

Fantastic airport design does exist in Asia. I can immediately think of Hong Kong, Singapore and Osaka. All these airports are designed around the concept of passengers as fluid, passing through the building from check-in to gate through a path of least resistance. I love arriving at Singapore's Changi airport because I know I can leave the plane, buy some last-minute duty-free goods, pick up my bag, clear immigration, catch a taxi without pre-booking and sink into a soft chair at the hotel within an hour of the tyres hitting the tarmac. At an Indian airport I generally feel I am doing well if I can locate my bag on the conveyor belt within the same timeframe.

This diatribe is a warning to the business traveller who may expect a pleasant journey by air (unlikely while still on the ground) and a plea to the federal government to improve the situation. Both Hyderabad and Bangalore are planning completely new airport terminals so there is a chance for two major cities to create twenty-first century facilities. Indian airport facilities don't need to be as smart as the fantastic Virgin lounges provided by Sir Richard Branson's airline. The lounge Branson has built in London is so much fun it makes me want to arrive at the airport as early as possible, and then you even get a massage on the plane.

Just being able to control the queues, providing facilities such as restaurants, bars, cafés and wi-fi Internet access would help. Most Indian travellers would pay more for better facilities and all foreign business travellers would pay considerably more. The revenue opportunities are there for the airport managers to exploit. After all, what other retail environment has thousands of high-worth individuals with money in their pocket and time to kill in an enclosed environment?