

'Expect the Unexpected' appropriate road sign

Northeast corner of India sees very few visitors

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For Victoria Times Colonist

Jamal honks harder, swerving our little Indicar around the diesel-spewing Tata truck, its bumper painted with a lively yellow, red and blue admonishment: "Horn Do."

The half-dead dump truck staggers around the bend with a load of rocks beyond any legal limit. The big eye painted on its fender stares passively at my white self pasted against the back seat as we pass another homemade-looking road sign, on yet another blind corner. Better to be Mr. Late, Than Late Mr.

And then, halfway from Guwahati, Assam, to Shillong, in the state of Meghalaya, I see the road sign that sums up India for me. "Expect the Unexpected."

This remote corner of northeastern India is one of the least visited by tourists. There are a few good reasons for that, one of them being the locals' penchant for insurgency and serious inter-ethnic conflicts.

My guide, my fixer and the man who feels like my very own guardian angel, Bikshipta Sindhu Doss, turns to me from his passenger front seat and says, "Ma'am, would like a coffee?"

Yes, indeed, this ma'am would. "That'd be great, Doss." I have given up trying to pronounce his name.

We pull up into a little town.

My arrival brings industry to a standstill. No one's being too discreet as they

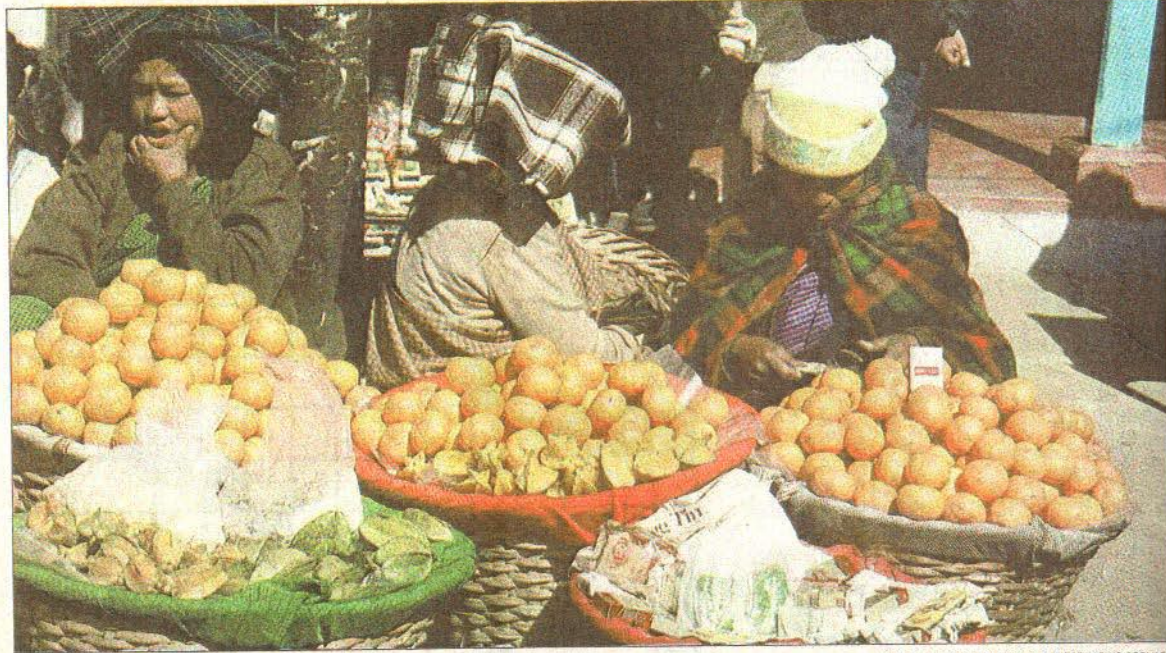
observe the giant ghost creature emerge from the little, and quite appropriately, white, Indicar. I should sell tickets. They are more mesmerized than rude in their wonder, so, once in awhile, I throw a wave or a smile, and move on.

Doss answers and explains everything I am trying to understand. He paves the way with suggestions from how to eat the roti (using only the right hand), to telling me the larger-than-life stories of the gods and legends, and of course, translates my endless requests for photo-stops to Jamal. Coffee imbibed, squat toilet used and ever grateful for Handiwipes, we're back on the fuming highway.

At the city of Byrnihat, traffic comes to a standstill. People are massing and surging past our stopped car as they run toward the flames we can see leaping above the trees. One of the shanty businesses is engulfed. It seems the whole mess of tiny wood shacks that lean and fall into each other is bound to go. But then it appears — a fire truck so old, so rusted and beaten — that it would be on display as a relic in Canada. The swamp of people parts to let it through and with buckets and hoses, and the sheer energy from so many helpers, the fire is contained and soon there is just the smoking, charred wreckage.

We continue winding and twisting up a narrow mountain road.

We are nearing the city of Shillong. At 1,500 metres, Shillong started as a misty



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Women sell fruit in the daily market at Shillong, in the Indian state of Meghalaya.

pine-treed hill station established during the British rule. The ruling elite could escape the heat and cool down in its misty chill and think fondly of their foggy Empire Isle back home. It seems well past its best-before date, with a swirling tempest of traffic and people obscuring the last bits of colonial buildings. Little of its Scottish origins are left, except for the incongruity of seeing natives wearing tartan sarongs. But somehow, the unbalanced glory of that past is embodied by my entrance into the Alpine Continental Hotel.

"Please follow the boy, Ma'am." The man at reception points to a man older than me. I follow the skinny bellhop. He has a sinewy grip on my bag; a bag that I packed small and light and am

quite capable of carrying, but have not had the opportunity to lift since I began this trip.

In his left hand he balances a large pink aerosol can and a Saran-wrapped television remote. He opens my door with a flourish, deposits my bag on the side counter, manages to make the TV work through the multiple layers of plastic protection and then, wonder of wonders, begins to spray. His enthusiasm to do the job right knows no limitations.

My eyes watering in pink gratitude, I press 30 rupees into his palm and settle into the freezing room. Seconds later, he's back, without the pink can. Now, he's holding an ancient piece of electrical equipment. He plugs it into the wall, and demonstrates the on/off button,

over and over. This game of charades, with him clicking the buttons and me trying to display comprehension, finally ends as the smell of ancient dusty-hot wires puffs up to mix with the previous odours.

A heater! I'm so grateful for this museum piece. I look quickly for more rupees but I'm too slow. He is nodding his way backwards out the door with three carefully practised English words, "Tea please, Ma'am?" This ma'am would love some tea, and lots more India to go with it.

If you go: www.indiatourism.com, www.incredibleindia.org and for the only Assamese government certified guide, contact Bikshipta Sindhu Doss at bikzin@rediffmail.com

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