

Autorickshaw to Connemara 2020

We have been using Autorickshaws in Indian Cities since 1973.

Every trip in an Autorickshaw is a bit of an adventure, some more so than others. They are totally unpredictable, famous for taking short cuts, heading against traffic and for completely disregarding pedestrians and other road users. We have been rushed through crowded bazaars and hurtled around Connaught place in Delhi, but in Madras in February 2020 we had a journey that will never be surpassed.



We came out of Wild Garden Café on Whites Road at about 7.30pm and wanted to go to Taj Connemara on Binny Road; only a short 100Rupee journey. We were hustled into an elderly Autorickshaw by a jolly but equally elderly driver.

Autorickshaws or Autos as the Indians call them are three wheelers built using motor scooter components. On the floor to the left of the driver is a handle about 20inches long this is instead of the foot operated 'kick-starter'. The driver tugs upwards on the handle to start the engine. Our Auto was old and a bit hard to start, the driver had to do a couple of short pulls to get the compression right then an almighty heave on the lever that nearly had him tumbling into the back seat. Almost immediately we observed that if our old Autorickshaw wasn't moving the engine would stop and the starting routine would have to be repeated.



Anyway, we set off, no wasting time looking behind just out into the traffic right under the front of an old bus with 60-80 passengers hanging off the steps, packed into the inside and hanging out of the unglazed windows. Moving along Whites Road looking to turn left into Smiths Road. Traffic from both directions on Whites Road is looking to turn into Smiths Road so there is a Jam at the junction. We must avoid coming to a stop so we look for gaps, everyone is looking for gaps so competition is fierce. We squeeze push and shove between a bus, the pavement, lampposts, barriers and pedestrians and soon we are out in front and moving up Smiths Road on the way to the junction with Mount Road.

Mount Road is a major east west dual carriageway with central barrier, four lanes in each direction and a lot of traffic. Without slowing, travelling at speed and with no time to notice the traffic lights we zoom across the junction, right turn and travel east along Mount Road. We are moving well, passing many vehicles and getting to the front of the crowd. I look to the left and I'm sure that we just passed Binny Road but interrupting our driver in our present situation would not be smart. We are heading east towards the traffic lights at a major junction with Old Club House Road to the right; traffic west bound on Mount Road is stopped at the lights. Our lights are changing to red when we reach the junction, but we have time and we launch ourselves into the junction at an angle aimed at the left side of Old Club House Road.

When we talk of four lanes of traffic at the lights, we in the UK may imagine four lines of cars separated by white lines waiting patiently just before the lights. It just isn't like that in India. The first couple of cars may stop at the lights but most ease forward into the junction as far as they dare. While the traffic is stopped, gaps are filled and Autorickshaws and two wheelers filter through and round the edges swelling the wall of traffic spilling out into the junction. They don't look at the lights; they are not waiting for the green light. They watch the traffic on the other side and they move as soon as they think they have seen an indication that the oncoming traffic is going to stop. This means that with every change of the lights late stoppers and early movers snarl in the middle of every junction.



So without hesitating we launch ourselves at speed into the junction; the opposing wall of traffic starts to move and immediately we are in the middle of them. We are trying to cross and go against them to get to the left of Old Club House Road. Lots of shouting and bumping; we are insistent, we try going left but we are pushed to the right, vehicles of all sorts are swerving around us, the tide is too much and the only thing to do is head for the shore. We don't have a lot of control over where we are going to end up.

At the junction there is a Police Hut; it's blue and about 4 foot across the front and 3 foot deep. There's a small door gap on one side and an opening on the front to allow the officer to lean out and observe happenings. It looks a bit like something cobbled together to serve as a temporary ticket box at a 1950s church fête.

We hit the police box, slide across the front and end up stuck down the side between the hut the wall and the remains of a bollard or lamppost. Suddenly there is a police officer leaning in and squeezed between the hut and the side of our vehicle. He is shouting a bit like the Sergeant Major portrayed by Windsor Davies in 'It Ain't Half Hot Mum'; khaki uniform, flat hat, brass buttons, medal ribbons above the left breast pocket and expressing his feelings about our driving and our mistreatment of his place of work.

Autorickshaws can turnaround on a postage stamp but they can't go backwards, so our charioteer jumps out and starts pulling our vehicle backwards. As soon as he can turn the steering 90 degrees to the right he is back in and tugging the starting handle. Our engine starts and we are off again out into the traffic and heading west on Mount Road. The officer clearly believes he has not yet said all he wanted to say but we care not. We move across Mount Road and run alongside the central barrier looking for a gap. We find a gap that may have been created by an earlier accident and bounce through, surprising vehicles that are motoring along eastwards in the 'fast' lane; we build

up speed and head back towards the same junction again. We seem to be ahead of most of the pack and making good speed, the lights are changing but this time we are about one second earlier. We zoom across the junction heading for the left side of Old Club House Road. The officer spots us and with shouts and gestures indicates his desire to continue discussions but we are on our way. About two hundred yards on we stop outside Taj Club House Hotel and our driver turns around looking for positive comments about our trip and his 100 rupees.

With hindsight, at this point it may have been smart to get out, pay him off and look for alternative transport but we didn't. We told him "No, this is Taj Club House we told you Taj Connemara". After a couple of heaves on the starter he spins the thing round on a postage stamp and we are off again up Old Club House Road and heading back to our favourite junction. I think all three of us realised that stationed at the end of the road was khaki clad difficulty. We approached the end of the road quite slowly and our driver positioned us alongside two people on a motorcycle. The policeman from his hut could only see the motorcycle and just another Autorickshaw, and anyhow he probably didn't think we were daft enough to come back a third time.

The traffic lights change and the motorcycle vanishes and we are left exposed heaving away at the starting lever

Ho! The policeman shouts and begins to tumble out the side of his hut. Our engine is now running and we are starting to move. The policeman estimates our trajectory and sets himself on a course to intercept roughly in the middle of Mount Road. But we're quick and our driver skilfully evades him - probably because of many previous similar incidents. We are off westwards on Mount Road leaving the policeman to deal with his position; a flat hat and no number of brass buttons and medal ribbons are any sort of protection when faced with Indian traffic that has just seen a green light.

We are going along Mount Road moving to the right, along the central barrier heading for the traffic lights where we want to turn right into Binny Road. Inside each of these Autorickshaw drivers there is a fairly astute businessman. Our driver was considering the position; this is only a 100 rupee job and if there are any more delays or diversions he is going to be out of pocket both in terms of time and mileage, so it's important to keep moving.

Ahead the lights are red and traffic is building up at the junction. In particular there is a sort of bulge of traffic mainly Autorickshaws and two wheelers gathered at the end of the fourth lane spilling out into the junction and waiting for the eastbound traffic to be stopped so they can move across to Binny Road. We move slowly towards the traffic gauging our progress but still moving forward on the basis that the lights must change sometime. We creep slowly through gaps and very slowly around the edge of the bulging traffic. We are getting very close to the limit now but that eastbound traffic has now been running for a long time and surely it must be about to stop.

We are at the front now and almost at a standstill, we are aimed across and slightly left towards the left side of Binny Road. We look to our right at the ballooning traffic waiting for the signal to move; important to be away before this lot and these people on Mount Road have had long enough. Experience tells us the lights are going to change now so we confidently set off across the junction.

Those who have tried to drive around the Arc de Triomphe in Paris will understand; there are no defined lanes but space probably for about 8 or more. At peak times it seems that two thirds of Paris traffic follows some sort of herd instinct to go to Arc de Triomphe and mindlessly go round and round in complete confusion until some mysterious force randomly spills them off onto one of the twelve avenues that radiate out.

What we were doing here on Mount Road in Madras is the equivalent of sitting in a motorised wheelie bin and launching ourselves against the Arc de Triomphe peak traffic.

We have misjudged it; these guys are not thinking of stopping. We bravely press on, keeping our eyes on the target trying to push left but at the same time being pushed right. Scooters are bumping into cars, motorcycles are unseating their riders. Bus drivers, who normally rule the road partly through terror and partly because their vehicles are so banged and beat-up that a few more bumps and scrapes don't matter are affronted, and vent their feelings through aggressive shouts, gestures and horn blasts. Autorickshaw drivers use all their skill and experience to maintain some sort of progress while looking on admiringly for we are clearly setting a new benchmark.

We battle though the chaos and emerge into the relative calm of Binny Road. Binny Road is an important dual carriageway with central barrier, a lot of traffic and is sometimes a bit chaotic but compared with where we have been in the past 10 or 15 minutes it is relative calm.

Our vehicle stops outside Taj Connemara and we tumble out. Our driver also gets out feeling the need to straighten limbs and to grab a few deep breaths after the recent excitement. All three of us are laughing almost uncontrollably. We haven't laughed like that for many years. It's laughter driven by relief, excitement and a touch of hysteria. We pay our driver and bid him farewell. We go into the hotel still laughing and often in the next 24hrs in the hotel, at the pool or in the restaurant we spontaneously burst into laughter.

The following day in the evening we came out of Wild Garden Café and the same Autorickshaw and driver was standing there. I was pleased to see him and greeted him warmly. He greeted us with jolly enthusiasm and offered his services. I was ready to go but Sue said 'No!'. In fact her rejection was clear, unequivocal and vigorous. Jagadish, we now know that was his name, looked confused and a bit hurt. Fortunately one of his fellow Rickshaw drivers stepped in and agreed to safely convey us to Taj Connemara.

We will use Wild Garden Cafe at Amethyst <http://www.amethystchennai.com/> when we are in Madras and possibly see Jagadish again.



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