

“Roll Over, Beethoven”

Chapter 8: my “gap year”?

Within a week of England winning the football world cup in July 1966 I was hitching from London down to Dover, next stop Calais, then eastern France, northern Italy, Yugoslavia (as it still was), Athens in Greece, then across the Mediterranean to Alexandria... My plan was to travel up the Nile to its main source in Lake Victoria. Then I'd see if I could find work for a while. Journalism was one idea, teaching probably a better one (I knew that Uganda's secondary schools depended on expats since Britain hadn't managed to educate and train enough locals before independence). After that, instead of continuing to follow the traditional “Cairo to the Cape” route, I could make for the east coast of Africa, cross the Indian ocean to Bombay (as it still was) and return to Europe overland.

So was it a “gap year”? In the end the whole trip lasted not much more than nine months (though I can claim a full year if you add the summer term I'd spent in Paris in 1960). The expression “gap year” didn't become trendy until the 1970s but the idea of a period of travel abroad with opportunities to interact with and learn from other cultures is pretty ancient. Think of the Grand Tour of 18th-century Europe undertaken by rich young gentlemen or the involuntary visits by conscripted national servicemen to Britain's turbulent, often revolting, colonies in the 1950s.

In Britain, Voluntary Service Overseas had been launched in 1958 just as national service in the armed forces was being phased out and there were various official ways that British teachers could be seconded to work abroad. But there was no question of my applying: to begin with I wasn't “a trained teacher” and I also didn't like the idea of committing myself to a two-year contract.

Before I left London I encountered what looked like a serious problem: of the two north African Muslim-dominated countries on the way up the Nile to Uganda, Egypt accepted tourists and would give you a transit visa but Sudan said no. The man at the embassy in London refused to issue a visa and said that travel over land from Egypt to Sudan wasn't possible – the new Aswan dam had flooded the area including the historic Sudanese city of Wadi Halfa; international tourists were not welcome and were not catered for, full stop: go to Sudan by air or not at all. What the travellers' grapevine said, though, was that in Cairo Sudanese visas *were* issued because local cross-border trade continued. Curiously, nobody in authority mentioned the war, perhaps because war had been endemic in Sudan since independence.

Sudan's first civil war (1955-72) was still going on in 1966; it was fought sporadically between the southern rebels, who were black Africans and mainly Christian or Animist (they believed that animals and plants had souls), and government forces; later the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972 gave the south some self-rule. After a series of armed conflicts South Sudan finally became an independent state in 2011. However, civil wars have continued there, mainly caused by tribal rivalries.

Hitching to Athens was uneventful. One memorable thing was that every other driver who picked you up was delighted to be able to rattle off the names of the victorious England football team – “Bobby Charlton, Gordon Banks, Nobby Stiles...” Those were the days...with England seemingly preferred to Germany, west and east, by most Europeans (but it was the Sixties, after all, the decade

of the Beatles et al). A Swiss driver in northern Italy gave me the address of a hotel in Cairo which, he said, was just what I'd want: clean and cheap with good European food. But in Athens I slept in my sleeping-bag on the roof of a hotel – in those days the cheapest option – waiting for the boat to Alexandria.

After the sea crossing I didn't stay long in Alex: I was on the first available train to Cairo. Travelling in the cheapest class I had to stand all the way – for more than four hours – firmly wedged with no wriggling room. It was a bit like the Northern tube line in London on a Monday morning. I was sweltering in shorts but the other men – all the fourth-class passengers I could see were men – looked much cooler in long white cotton gowns. Rail travel was certainly cheap. I think it cost a total of £2 to go from Alex to Aswan in the south of Egypt. It would have been ridiculous to hitch with rail travel as cheap as it was.

Aswan in August was hot, the hottest place I'd ever been. Walking slowly out of the sun and into the shade didn't seem to make any difference to the temperature. But I found that being on the water and being moved even at slow speed through the sultry air seemed to help a bit: the next stage of the journey was by boat south across Lake Nasser to Wadi Halfa ("bloody halfway" in old soldier speak). This was a replacement Wadi Halfa – the original lies underneath the lake that was created by the building of the Aswan dam.

Next I had a long, hot, slow, dusty train ride across the Nubian desert to Khartoum where I stayed with expat friends for a few days. There was more train to come after that, from Khartoum south to Kosti, where the railway line ended and it was back to the river for an almost 1500km journey to Juba, Sudan's southern capital. This was supposed to take seven days and actually took 10 because the ancient paddle steamer made such slow progress through the vast papyrus swamp known as the Sudd, a barrier that had defeated the Romans and many later explorers.

My fellow travellers included various locals and their livestock – goats and chickens, mainly – some Sudanese soldiers and two other foreigners. There was also a cargo of onions piled up on deck. The soldiers provided a military escort against the possibility of a raid by southern guerrillas called the Anyanya – and we were closely guarded. We slept in a dormitory of tiered bunk beds which had a base of metal slats; in the next bunk to mine was a soldier who placed his rifle alongside himself so its muzzle was inches from my nose.

One of the foreigners was a Frenchman, like me in his early 20s, who was planning to continue south after Uganda, ultimate destination the Cape; the other was a young Kenyan Sikh, who'd spent time studying in London, and was on his way to his family home in Nairobi via Uganda. He confessed that he was dreading the reunion with his father. London had corrupted him in all sorts of ways that he'd be able to conceal but the overwhelming and inescapable fact was that he'd had his sacred Sikh hair cut short. The Frenchman and I continued his journey on the road to ruin by teaching him poker.

There were various stops – Malakal and Bor I remember – so that passengers and livestock could get on and off. But we didn't stop at Kodok, which is the modern name for Fashoda, the historic meeting-place in 1898 for two rival colonial expeditions, one British, the other French. There was a confrontation there but not a battle, which is why it's called the Fashoda "Incident". The French wisely gave way to superior British force and the Sudan was confirmed as subject to Anglo-Egyptian

rule. But French chauvinists nursed a grievance that lasted until the British navy sank their fleet at Oran in 1940 – giving them a much better excuse for hostility towards *la perfide albion*.

After Malakal, as we continued south towards the equator, the paddle steamer struggled increasingly against the vegetation; the heat became stronger and more humid; the insects noisier. The odd crocodile appeared out of the water seeming to rest on patches of vegetation to take the sun. On deck the day was dominated by flies; the night by mosquitoes. But in the foul-smelling and ill-lit showers and toilets the mosquitoes flew their missions day and night. So we were in and out of there as quickly as possible.

At first we ate some of our meals in the steamer's restaurant, which was open to all passengers including those with cheap tickets. They served an excellent three-course English breakfast as well as lunch and dinner: things like omelettes, kedgeree, fishcakes, freshly caught fried fish (well, they said it was freshly caught) and, most memorably, that distinctive British Empire product, Rose's lime marmalade. We also bought food from the various vendors where the steamer stopped. But as progress upriver slowed, supplies started to run out in the restaurant; even the locals seemed worried. So once we filched an onion from the huge pile on deck and added it to a tin of peas that the Frenchman said he was keeping for emergencies – the result was *petits pois à la française* which we heated on a borrowed charcoal stove.

The extreme humidity was having an effect – and I was still a cigarette-smoker – so by the time we finally got to Juba I was coughing, feeling unsteady and looking distinctly pale underneath my sun tan. The town was effectively under martial/police law and this certainly applied to foreigners, particularly ones who weren't proper paying tourists or business people. I immediately found myself confined to Juba hospital, examined by a local Arab doctor and declared to be suffering from bronchopneumonia and malaria.

Was I going to die? Was I going to have to stay in Juba for weeks? I'd missed the first plane south to Entebbe but I was allowed to take the second after only a few days in hospital. And when I arrived there the Ugandan-Asian doctor who examined me said I didn't in fact have either of the alleged illnesses, just a bit of a cough.

The cough cleared up and I proceeded to enjoy myself (and start smoking again). Because of its geography the Entebbe-Kampala region in the state of Buganda has a comfortable climate: consistent temperatures with very little seasonal variation; no extreme, humid heat because of its elevation (nearly 4,000 feet), and no cold because it's almost on the equator; a lot of rain in the rainy season – but 10 minutes after a heavy shower it was hard to find evidence of it on the earth, since the water had evaporated so quickly. All this made Buganda, the largest of Uganda's kingdoms, fertile, rich and traditionally dominant over its neighbours.

In the local markets there was always fruit – mango, paw-paw, pineapple, passionfruit, above all, different kinds of banana – and of course vegetables, which were harvested not once or twice but all the year round. It was said that when London-bound passenger flights were underbooked, things like artichokes and green peppers were added as freight for the Covent Garden wholesale market. There was also a plentiful supply of cannabis in leaf form, ready rolled into cigarettes and sold in recycled packets of Marlboro and Lucky Strike – 18 joints for about the same price as 20 virginia tobacco

cigarettes. So you could afford to smoke your own – no need for the elaborate spliff-sharing ritual of the hippy commune.

Lake Victoria looked very enticing but the first white person you met, and the second, said emphatically: “Do not, whatever you do, go swimming in the lake.” The problem was and is the risk of bilharzia or “snail fever”, a debilitating disease caused by a parasitic fluke released by freshwater snails. There were also said to be crocodiles. So I resisted the urge to swim.

But after the alcohol-free deserts of the Muslim north it was good to get a drink. There wasn't much that was both drinkable and affordable in the way of wine but there was plenty of lager-type beer, such as Nile Special, brewed at Jinja, and Tusker from Kenya, named after the rogue elephant that killed one of the brewery founders in 1922 when he was on safari. And there was *waragi*, a locally produced colourless spirit distilled from banana. Mixed with orange juice this gave you something like a screwdriver (if you were weaned on vodka) or plain old gin-and-orange if you weren't. *Waragi* certainly contributed to Kampala's lively nightlife where the clubs seemed to admit people without too much formality; the ethnic groups mixed freely; the girls were friendly; the party swung.

Well, up to a point: Uganda's national heartthrob at the time seemed to be the late white country singer Jim Reeves. I found this difficult to make sense of. Reeves had died in an airplane crash in 1964 but his canny widow continued to release his records. By a weird coincidence his only UK number one, *Distant Drums*, knocked the Beatles off the top of the British charts on 22 September 1966 just as I arrived in Uganda. Strange days.

From the way the expats behaved I also found it hard to believe that only a few months before, on 24 May 1966, the prime minister of Uganda, Milton Obote, had ordered his military commander, Idi Amin, to attack the royal compound in Mengo*, shelling the palace. Mutesa II, who was the hereditary Kabaka (king) of Buganda and had been elected president of Uganda**, managed to escape in the confusion and fled to London. But in and around the Battle of Mengo Hill there were said to have been hundreds of casualties. Now in September a few months later the expat community seemed curiously unaffected by the upheaval, almost as though they were living in a parallel universe. Sensible people avoided the Entebbe-Kampala road at night but otherwise expat life seemed to go on as relatively normal.

*Mengo when I was there was spelt Mmengo but I have used the modern spelling.

**Obote had suspended Mutesa as president, then replaced him, effectively assuming dictatorial powers. Obote's regime lasted for five years until the Commonwealth heads of government meeting of 1971 when Idi Amin deposed him in his absence and began his own dictatorship – a notorious and far more vicious reign of terror.

After a few weeks of rest and recuperation I started to ask around to see if any of the local secondary schools had a vacancy. I found one immediately – at the Mengo Senior School. It was the oldest school in Uganda and had been founded by the (Anglican) Church Missionary Society in 1895 as a free school for boys and girls. It was now boys-only and fee-paying, like all Ugandan schools. But why was there a vacancy at Mengo, the prestigious centre of the Baganda world? It was astonishing – or perhaps not: perhaps there was a vacancy because the school *was* in Mengo and other people didn't want to work there so soon after the battle.

The English headmaster, the Rev Brian Armitage, had arrived earlier in 1966 and was full of bright and progressive ideas. He'd decided to bring co-education back to the school in the following year but his plan to include current affairs in the curriculum was for now – and I fitted into it perfectly. The school already had reels of news film on world events delivered weekly with some accompanying written text, but this needed editing into a script and in some cases the addition of a bit of background so the boys could make better sense of it. Then, as the weekly film was projected, someone had to read out the script and deal with questions. This was a dream job, really, for an apprentice hack/teacher. And before I started I was sent on a short course in African history at Makerere college (now university).

My pupils were mostly local boys from Buganda but there were some Sudanese refugees, who were particularly tall and willowy-looking and coal-black as opposed to dark brown. What distinguished the boys as a group was their courtesy, their good humour and their positive attitude to being schooled. The idea of a “discipline problem”, your everyday experience as a London teacher, at Mengo seemed a long way away.

I filled in for some other lessons as well, history and English mainly, and was an extra man for sport. The first few minutes running around chasing a football at Mengo had me struggling to breathe – the problem was the altitude more than the heat. During my stay in Uganda I played my first game of squash (even more breathlessness) on what had been the Kabaka's squash court in Entebbe which was now open to people in government service and their friends. My sporting highlight, though, was a cricket match where I turned out for Makerere versus the Africa Cricket Club. I learnt that much of the cricket in Uganda was organised on ethnic/religious lines with teams of Indians, Muslims and Goans. When Amin expelled the Asians, he devastated Ugandan cricket as well as the economy.

I often had lunch with the boys – plain vegetarian food like beans, rice, millet, and *matoke*, the local banana staple – and once or twice I was invited to lunch with other teachers in their houses which were in the school grounds. As elsewhere in expat land the meal was cooked and brought to the table by African servants. I began to sense an awkwardness in my hosts: these were natural *Guardian* readers who now found themselves employing – exploiting? – domestic servants. But the servants came with the school house and would have been made homeless as well as jobless if my colleagues had decided they couldn't possibly put up with being waited on.

In my brief stay in Uganda I met Daniel Nelson who edited *The People*, a weekly published by the ruling Uganda People's Congress, from 1965 to 1969 and those responsible for producing the cultural/political magazine *Transition*. This had been launched in 1961 by Rajat Neogy, a Ugandan Asian born in Kampala the son of two teachers, and schooled there and in London at the School of Oriental and African Studies. *Transition* had attracted anyone who was anyone in African intellectual life across the whole continent – people like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and Ali Mazrui, who had just arrived at Makerere. Another contributor was Paul Theroux, the American travel writer and novelist, who had come to Kampala in 1965, having been chucked out of the Peace Corps* for allegedly interfering in Malawi politics. He started at Makerere as a lecturer and was soon promoted to acting head of adult studies. He and Rajat were good friends and drinking buddies.

*a US government agency of volunteers set up by President Kennedy in 1961, variously described as “missionaries of democracy” and “an outgrowth of the cold war”

Rajat could charm anybody even if you'd only just met him but Paul was a bit prickly. Although he was a dissident rather than a loyal American he seemed rather put out when I criticised the United States and insisted that it had replaced Britain as the predominant imperialist threat in many parts of Africa. Paul seemed to think that Britain was still the main problem.

A few months after I left Uganda Paul wrote two pieces in *Transition* that ruffled more than a few feathers. The first, "Tarzan is an Expatriate", pilloried the British in East Africa for being patronising neo-colonialists; the second, "Hating the Asians", asserted that "nearly everyone" – the British, the Africans, even some Asians – "hates the Asians". The orthodox view in newly independent Africa, Paul said, was that to hate the Asians was to show patriotism and, for the progressive non-African, to prove one's correct political credentials.

But the key question was: to what extent had the Asians in East Africa brought their unpopularity on themselves? In 2002, 30 years after Idi Amin expelled the Ugandan Asians, one of them, Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, who'd been embarrassed as a teenager by the anti-African racism shown by members of her own family, admitted in the *Independent*: "We Asians did not share our wealth and skills...and we did illegally send out money." And her killer punch: "Most Asians were deeply racist."*

*5/8/2002 y.alibhai-brown@independent.co.uk

She repeated the point more than 20 years later. On 24 November 2023 she told the *Times*: "Idi Amin was a brute but there was also a lot of racism among the country's Asians towards blacks."

Theroux's pro-Asian piece was much less coherent and measured than the Tarzan one which was a wholly justified onslaught on the British expats who were having their cake and eating it. Obote's regime was a repressive dictatorship from which the Africans – above all, the Baganda – were suffering while the expats lived a charmed life.

Transition was a rare thing in Africa – or anywhere – a genuine forum for discussion, and Rajat published loads of letters from affronted British expats in reply to the Tarzan piece. At the same time came the bombshell: like *Encounter*, the British literary and cultural magazine it resembled, *Transition* was revealed to have been secretly funded by the CIA via the conduit of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. I'm pretty sure that Rajat had no idea of the CIA connection; certainly he was emphatic on this point and the contents of *Transition* back him up.

A year or so later Rajat paid the price of editing a lively and controversial magazine under an authoritarian regime: he was arrested and jailed together with the contributor who'd offended the government. There was a pantomime element to all this: at first instead of Rajat the police arrested Daniel Nelson by mistake because someone in authority gave the order "Arrest the editor" – and Nelson was the one they were familiar with.

.....

For me, it was time to go. I was always more of a fly-by-night than a settler, and now I had a potential partner who fancied the trip to Mombasa, which for me was the way out of Africa, and she also had an open invite to a luxurious villa on the coast. So we set off by train on the Kampala-Mombasa railway, stopping for an hour or so at Nairobi. We travelled first-class in a two-person compartment, ate well in the restaurant and drank in the dramatic scenery, which included crossing the rift valley. It was the visual highlight of my nine-month circular journey.

As A wrote later: “The rift comes upon you suddenly – an enormous plaster model from a forgotten geography lesson. The plains have been torn apart by a huge subterranean force. Two thousand feet below the valley floor is at that height a scrub-covered plain studded with extinct volcanoes and umbrella-shaped trees.”

In Mombasa we lazed in the sun and the warm sea water, ate lobster and mango, dreamt of the future. Then A had to go back on the train to Kampala while I waited for the steamer to take me on across the Indian ocean to Bombay (renamed Mumbai in 1995). With a 10-day stay in front of me, I was forced back to economy class. I found a bed at the Asian-owned Happy Hotel, sharing a room with four other men, all Asians, and learnt at firsthand about the “Asian price”. I paid 7 shillings 50 a night while the others, I found out, paid just 5 shillings. For meals it was the same thing.

One of my fellow guests was a friendly gold smuggler from the Congo – perhaps it was the fact that, like me, he was a bit of an outsider that brought us together. We compared restaurant prices and his were always lower than mine. Later he took me to an Indian restaurant where I had been charged 4 shillings for a meal. While I waited outside he tried to persuade the proprietor to let me pay the Asian price which was 3 shillings. He was unsuccessful: the proprietor stuck to his rule: 4s for Africans and whites; 3s for Asians.

To make a pretty obvious point: for almost all Europeans (which is what white people, including Americans, were called in East Africa) this “Asian price” business was hardly a problem because they could afford to pay a bit more. But for the Africans it was a constant reminder that they didn’t really run, and so benefit from, the economy of their own country. Formal independence from Britain hadn’t led to equality: the Asians as a dominant economic elite were living on borrowed time.

Waiting for the ship, I spent the days exploring Mombasa in the heat, occasionally nipping into a bank or public building for a blast of air-conditioning. I found a bookshop which sold Frank Harris’s autobiography and Doris Lessing’s *Golden Notebook* which really impressed me. I started doing the daily crossword in the *Herald Tribune* and occasionally finished it. I won’t go on about the flies, the noise and the beggars. And it wasn’t overpoweringly hot all the time. I noted: “It is relatively cool in Mombasa between 5 and 7am...”

After 10 sweaty nights in the Happy Hotel dormitory the time came to exchange it for life on the ocean wave. But on board ship in deck class the sleeping arrangements were certainly worse. We were down in the hold with two-tiered bunks packed tightly together in a much bigger dormitory, men women and children all together. Once a child woke up and cried. The mother shouted and made more noise than the child. The child went on crying.

On the first day there was an announcement that deck-class passengers were not allowed to use first or second-class facilities. But this turned out to be only a formal ban, so we could in fact use the bathrooms and toilets and also the bar and lounge reserved for cabin-class passengers.

There were six non-Asian foreigners in deck class: two Aussies, two more Englishman, a 20-year-old Japanese* student and me. I got on best with the Japanese boy, Toru, who’d set off from Tokyo a year before by air to Moscow, wearing a dark suit and carrying a designer suitcase; now he wore jeans and a British army combat jacket and carried a kitbag. He had only one shirt so I gave him one of mine. We carried on to Delhi together. One of the other Englishmen, Tony, was a north Londoner

who'd emigrated to South Africa, tried various jobs including working in the docks at Durban, and then hitched up to Kenya. He was on his way, he said, to Spain where he had vague hopes of a job for the summer.

*How could a Japanese person possibly be treated as "non-Asian"? Very easily, just as in apartheid South Africa where the Japanese were given the formal status of "honorary white" for economic and political reasons.

The six of us were adopted by the chief steward who said he would arrange for us to have a fried egg at breakfast to supplement the ship's 100% vegetarian/vegan diet. That wasn't all: as the voyage continued the steward started buying me beers at the bar and paying for my entry to the bingo games that were our main public diversion. It was soon clear what I was expected to do in return. "I have a huge cardboard crate to take through the customs for the steward who supplies me with beer," I wrote in my notebook. It contained bottles of whisky, nylon shirts, tinned cheese...Other travellers took transistor radios through customs. None of us were stopped.

Smuggling (including drugs, of course) was one of the ways indigent Western travellers financed their travel in the third world. Another was to make use of the currency black market. In India, Egypt and Turkey the exchange rate for dollars and sterling on the street was 50% higher than it was in the bank. To try to stop people exploiting this, at international borders you often had to fill in a form declaring the foreign currencies you held – to be checked when you left the country.

But the most productive way to make money was to sell unsigned travellers' cheques on the black market, report a fictitious theft to the police and collect new travellers' cheques from the bank. Barry, assisted by Ken, another English boy, sold \$150 worth of travellers' cheques for \$70. Masahide, a 19-year-old Japanese boy who claimed to be cycling round the world, got \$140 for \$300 worth of travellers' cheques. Toru went with him to a Delhi police station to confirm his story of being robbed and was rewarded with \$30.

A slightly hazardous way of funding your travel, which I never dreamt of doing because I'd had jaundice years before, was to sell your blood. You could do this in various places – the top rate I heard quoted was in Kuwait, £10 a pint. Rail travel on the hippy trail was cheap – and even cheaper with a student card. Turkey gave students a 40% reduction on train tickets; Egypt, India and Pakistan gave 50%. In Istanbul main railway station six English boys, after clubbing together to buy a Turkish student card for a dollar, showed it in turn at the ticket window and so paid just over \$3 to cross Turkey by train.

Bombay was huge, bustling, lively – so many shops, people cars, noise... the most magnificent fruit and vegetable market I'd ever seen. Piles of fruit in geometric patterns, the pineapples delicately carved so the slices on sale have patterned edges. The smell of dung everywhere in the streets but no cows wandering; just one herd of cattle settled down for the night in the middle of the market area. On Grant Road, Kamathipura, the sex workers – five or six standing together – clutch at your sleeve as you pass, some very young, all with heavy make-up. Several dentists advertise false teeth in the window but otherwise look like any other shop. A bit bigger is a building labelled "Hospital: for skin, venereal and other diseases."

Most of the travelling hippies were male with the occasional couple but in Bombay I met Angela, a 19-year-old from somewhere in Surrey, who'd come to India 17 months before to fill the gap between school and university; now she was determined to stay rather than go back and study. She'd started off with just under £100, had £10 stolen and had £20 left, so she needed a job. So far she'd worked just the one day as a film extra in Bombay's bustling film industry. She was short and tubby with a big bosom, baggy trousers topped by an Indian-style tunic and still after 17 months naively open-mouthed about India: "It's so full of life," she enthused. "It's wonderful how alive some of these people are."

The train from Bombay to Delhi was fairly clean, certainly cleaner than an Egyptian train – but then the engine soot came in through the open window and lay in drifts. Snapshot of a Delhi street scene: "Cars, including pre-war Austins and Fords, buses, trucks, bicycles, scooters, motor bikes, orthodox taxis, bicycle rickshaws, two-seater scooter rickshaws, four-seater motorbike rickshaws, four-seater horse cabs, bullock carts, horse and carts, hand-carts, people streaming through the mass of vehicles dodging them – and of course the stately cow wandering unafraid."

A few years later, Paul Theroux recorded a similar experience in Calcutta: "Ponies harnessed to stagecoaches laboured over cobblestones; men pushed bicycles loaded with hay bales and firewood. I had never seen so many forms of transport: wagons, scooters, old cars, carts and sledges and odd, old-fashioned horse-drawn vehicles that might have been barouches."*

**The Great Railway Bazaar*, Hamish Hamilton, 1975

But Delhi had something else. As well as the noise, the dirt, the dung, the flies it had New Delhi, laid out by Sir Edwin Lutyens, where the embassies are. There were: "Green parks, flowers, trees, big buildings in maroon and pale pink, clean roads." In Delhi itself the railway station restrooms (not an American euphemism for toilets: you actually rested there on daybeds) were free to travellers including those, like me and Toru, who were between train trips. He was about to leave for Agra and promised to come to London in a year's time (so far as I know he never made it). The station restaurant served things like scrambled eggs on toast with tea. I noted: "The tablecloth is white and clean; there are few flies; the smell of trains rather than drains... "

I'm waiting for a visa for Afghanistan. When it arrives it's back to the train: from Delhi into Pakistan via Lahore to Peshawar; then by bus into Afghanistan through the Khyber Pass and on to Kabul, Kandahar, Herat; and, still by bus, through Iran to the Turkish border, and back to the train for the last lap to Istanbul. For most of the journey there's a standard meal available at every stop: a spicy lamb/mutton rice dish – biryani if you like – with tea, usually black but sometimes with optional goat's milk. Then in the shop attached you can buy dessert: oranges and raisins. Since we're in Islamic territory there's no beer or wine, of course.

A highlight of the trip: climbing in a rickety old bus on the western edge of Pakistan up towards the Khyber Pass: brown barren terrain; occasional ruins of abandoned forts; plaques of the British regiments which had fought against the Pathan tribesmen who were never subdued – leaving the pass as the north-west frontier of the British Empire.

On the train in Turkey I met three American boys, students from Neuchâtel university in Switzerland. For their vacation they'd driven to Istanbul, parked their Volkswagen, and carried on east by train.

Now they were late for the new spring/summer term, keen to get back as soon as possible: yes, they'd be pleased to give me a lift to Switzerland if I did my share of the driving. So when they'd collected their car from the garage off we went – through Bulgaria, Yugoslavia (as it then was), northern Italy and up into Switzerland, without stopping for meals, just sandwich/petrol/toilet stops, rotating the driving among the four of us and completing the whole thing in not much more than 24 hours. In hitch-hiking terms it was the one-off unbeatable lift that would always win a race – even against single blonde girls: you just couldn't go any faster.

After that there was an anti-climactic journey back to Dover and London. I hitched of course but the fun, the tension, the excitement had gone: I thought I was going back to a humdrum, work-dominated existence. I had no idea that the final phase of "the Sixties" was about to burst into life.