



Once across the border into India we immediately felt the change. We had entered Bihar, one of the country's poorest states, although that cannot excuse the experience of trying to drive across its territory. The roads in particular were almost criminally dangerous with no apparent rule other than the pre-eminence of road-mass. Even the use of the horn was indiscriminate, used to jostle rather than communicate, while we often only avoided head on collisions by driving off the road or just stopping to give the overtaking vehicle coming toward us sufficient time to pull in. Once off the road there are very few places to stay and the motels we did find were seedy affairs even by our lowest standards. At one Ruth had to discourage the manager who used a pretext to get me out of the room so he could be alone with her for a short while – something he probably regretted. Finally, the Landyvan, always a thing of interest for locals, began here to feel more like an ostentatious liability, an unfamiliar experience fortus. All this did not amount to a rosy introduction in India, a place that we had hoped to spend many months touring before returning home.

After a few more incredulous incidents we reached Calcutta (or Kolkata in its new more phonetic Indian spelling) and dropped the car like a hot potato into the car park at the airport. We had booked flights for a Christmas and New Year holiday on the Andaman Islands and negotiated with the car park manager a long term arrangement for a minimum of 30 days. We were not keen to return and felt like we deserved our vacation.

India's surprises did not get left with the car however. When we appeared for check in at the airport the next morning we were told, along with the other foreigners on our flight that our

VISAs did not cover the Andaman Islands and we were not to be allowed on the flight. After disbelieving tears and arguments the airport manager was eventually browbeaten into calling his opposite number in Port Blair and this decision was suddenly and inexplicably reversed. Although this does not sound like the makings of a love affair with India, things did get better...



Once off the plane in Port Blair we smoothly made our way through the permit process as expected from the outset. We caught the early ferry to Havelock and were on the beach before we had started thinking of lunch. Although it took Ruth a couple of days to repair frayed nerves this was starting to feel more like it.

The Andamans are a small group of islands more local to South East Asia than the India to which they belong. They, along with the neighboring Nicobar Islands, form the peaks of an underwater mountain range. Only a few of the Islands are inhabited and some of these by tribes protected from external contact. Their most recent claim to fame is as the epicenter of the 2004 earthquake that triggered the tsunami that wiped out settlements on many of the Islands, although apparently the indigenous people had long fled to high ground after reading signs of the impending doom in the natural world around them. The most lasting sign of damage is the change in sea level, which is as much as 4 meters in some areas of the islands.













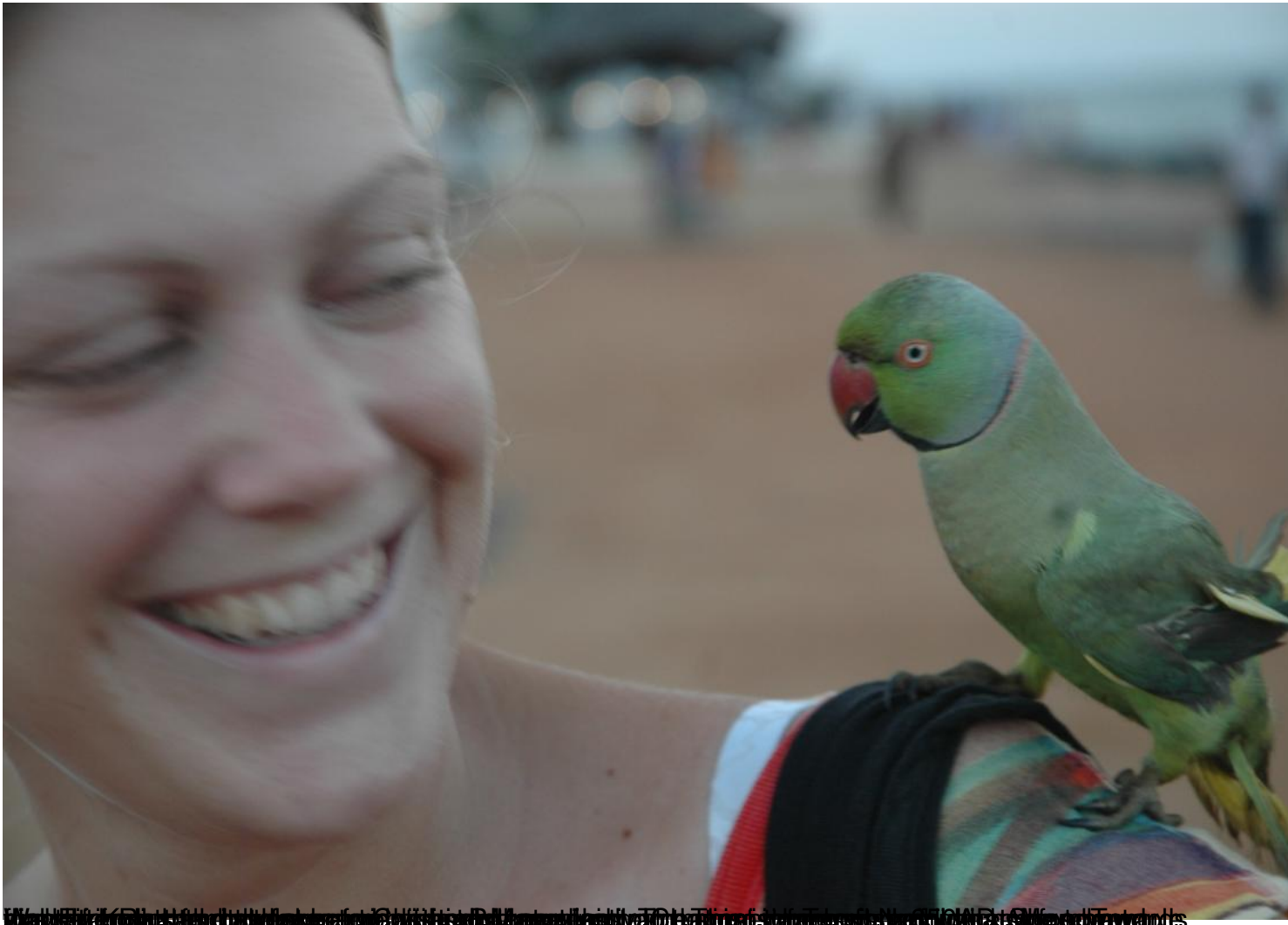




























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