

1-1-07 Shillong, India
Folks,

Well, it's New Year's Day and I am in Shillong, India, at Ri's house in the Abode of the Clouds. We're at about 5,000 feet asl and it is cold here. No real heat in anyone's house so we sit huddled around little electric space heaters a lot. I have finally found some time to myself, no-one stuffing me with food, and I will try to get this Christmas letter started.



I'm sure to be interrupted soon, so this will probably be a first installment. I had big plans to use my seven hour layover on Christmas day in Singapore to send a fat letter packed with pictures, but I couldn't establish a wireless connection. I did get some time though to take some pix of me moping around the airport, alone on Christmas day.

Arriving in Calcutta late Christmas Day, I got my present - getting back together with Ri after nearly 4 months apart!

She had come over to India in early September for the big ceremony on the anniversary of her brother's death, and I was supposed to join her. But I was late, late, late arriving. Just couldn't get away any earlier. In fact we closed a deal on Friday before Xmas, and I was on the plane Saturday bound for India.



This is what I looked like Friday after we finally(!) closed our deal.



In Calcutta, after several hours with tech support I did get my BlackBerry and my Laptop connected but the internet experience was frustratingly slow – slower than a dial-up. So I didn't get the letter sent from there either. I was too busy anyway just walking around taking in Calcutta (Kolkata now), which is a most remarkable city. Human enterprise at its most basic, and at the grandest of scales. Not enterprise like what birthed Standard Oil, but millions upon millions of micro enterprises based upon the most primal instinct – surviving the day. No major industries. Instead, millions of people scratching out a living selling little bits and pieces of what everyone needs to survive, or providing some meager service, all done at the slimmest of margins. Below is a fellow who has opened a food shop in the 20 cubic feet of space underneath a cigarette stall, and sure enough, he has five customers lined up on the sidewalk.



Kolkata's teeming masses of humanity surge through the streets, every pedestrian a jaywalker, every driver an aggressive scofflaw. The sidewalks are so jammed with street-hawkers that you are forced to walk in the street.



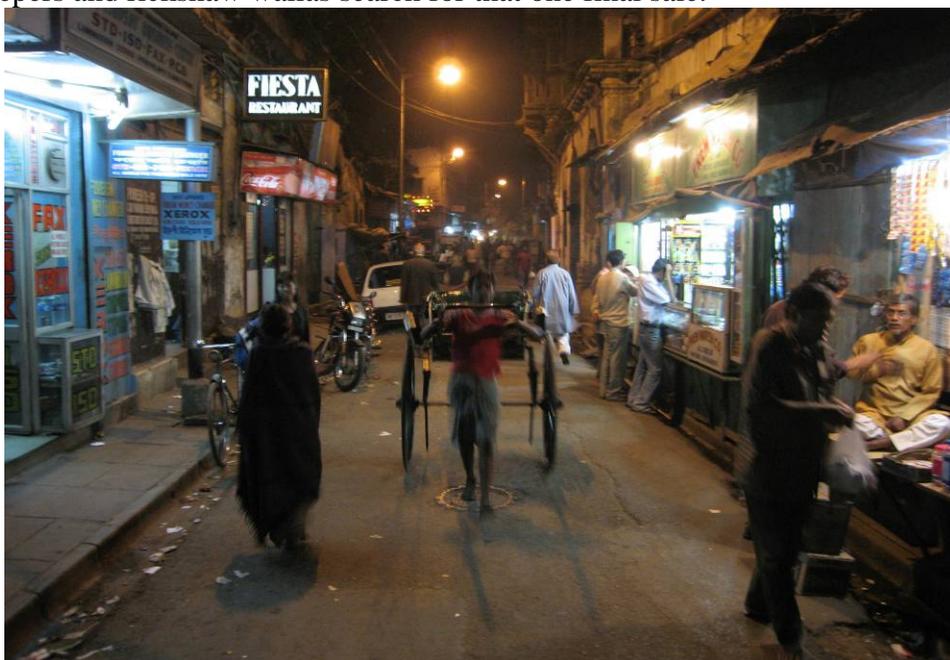
A cross-town taxi ride costing about \$1.25, has as many eye popping thrills and jaw dropping scenery as any Disney or carnival ride. The pace is so frantic, the streets so

choked with traffic, that the wandering holy cows, a symbol of India, have been banned inside city limits.

At night Kolkata is even more surreal with the swirl and crush of humanity lit by the gaudy lighting of advertisements and shop signs.



As the city starts to wind down, the din of millions, yelling and honking and banging in a desperate bid to survive, lessens, the streets begin to unclog, and the exhausted shopkeepers and rickshaw wallas search for that one final sale.

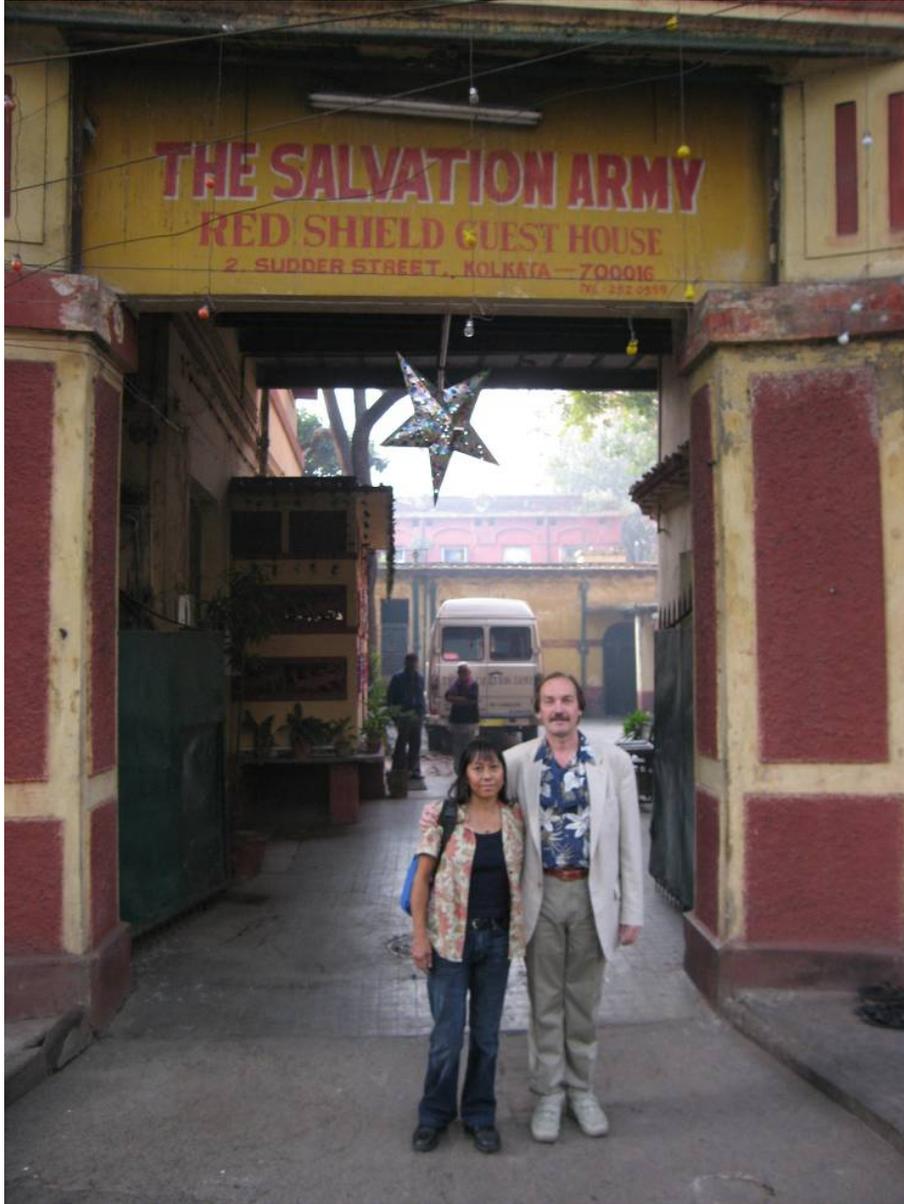


Finally the city takes its daily break, and the rickshaw wallas curl up on the sidewalk to catch a few hours of sleep. This shot from our hotel window in pre-dawn light.



And this crazy city has a few blessed hours of quiet, before the cycle starts all over again.

Ri and I got to reminisce a bit. Here we are in front of the place we stayed at 34 years ago when we first left Shillong after we were married. We wandered around inside and it is still exactly the same.



After a few days breathing some of the worst air on the planet we flew from Kolkata to Gauhati and hired a van to haul us up into the mountains to Shillong. Then I encountered an even more severe problem with wireless service – after much fiddling around we learned that international roaming is banned in NE India (!), so I have tapped into a phone line here at the house for internet access and can finally get this letter going, and have bought a new voice-only SIM card for the BlackBerry. The SIM card was supposed to be activated within hours, but we are now three days into it and still no connection. Oh well. It's India – got to (re)learn to relax.

More later from Shillong.

Happy New Year!

Peter and Ri.