

Bandits at every o'clock, driver

In part two of his series on flight testing two Streak Shadows bought by the Indian Air Force (to scare off kites which were bringing down its jets and for staff to fly for fun), Anthony Preston risks death on the roads and has an even riskier encounter with Elvis



AS a treat, I decided to flee the hotel beside Hindan Air Force base and splash out my Virgin Air Miles on a couple of nights at the Le Meridien hotel in downtown New Delhi.

However, the taxi ride into town turned into a greater risk than any MiG29 or Streak Shadow pilot would ever contemplate.

It takes time getting used to tractors with no lights in the fast lane of the dual carriageway, heading in the wrong direction, and cows with no lights sauntering in any direction in any lane they choose. It takes time to get used to a million bicycles, five or six abreast, weaving imperturbably in among the three-wheeled rickshaws and the scooters, some with four people astride, belching out smoke screens to conceal the even worse hazards ahead.

It is difficult not to be distracted by the sight of a massive, hairy pedestrian in the throng at the edge of the road who turns out to be a large brown bear, or by three-wheelers piled 10 times their own height with brightly coloured plastic bags.

Gaudily painted, colourfully decorated lorries were everywhere, each with an invitation on their tailboard – *Horn please* – which no one ignored. The horn is used in the same way as the brakes or steering wheel, as a means of control. Miraculous-

ly, it works. The taxi driver, hand glued to the horn, accelerated as fiercely as a clapped out three-cylinder Suzuki engine allowed, to overtake a slow-moving bus on the inside, preferring the dangers of bicycles, cows, pedestrians, dogs, scooters and rickshaws to the boulders, parched trees and squatting nomads that made up the central reservation.

It was quite obvious there was no way through. The mass of bicycles, scooters and three-wheelers was more dense than the bus itself. I prayed my driver would recognize an impenetrable zone when he saw it, and shut my eyes.

Yet we got through, and we got through again on other days. As a means of transporting a mass of people in the shortest time, it had merit, but took a deal of nerve.

One particular IAF driver would have been a terror in Paris or Milan, but here he was like the timorous rigger player who thinks caution will save him from hurt, and we emerged, white-faced and shaking at the end of the journey. It was undeniably far safer to be driven by the conventional maniac. What an extraordinary contrast it made with the serenity and peace to be found in the sky above.

The behaviour of a people on their roads is an indicator of their approach to life. Look at any scene in India and be immediately struck by movement, seething ▷

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Cartoon by Ben Ashman



▷ movement. There is an energy and a general sense of working collectively. Perhaps it's the result of being pressed together so much. A collective sense of humour, in often desperate circumstances, brings about mutual tolerance and understanding. That's what makes it work on the roads. There are many breakdowns, but surprisingly few accidents. There is order in the chaos, though it's tricky to find.

Speaking with the officers of AF Hindan, the importance of order became apparent, since 90% of marriages are still, in this part of the world, arranged. The choice of partner is a family responsibility. Love grows with the relationship rather than being the physically based cause of it. As a result, one could be forgiven for thinking that prostitution and divorce would be prevalent. It's the opposite. In India the break-up of a marriage is as rare as an empty cricket pitch on a Saturday afternoon.

Despite the urge to close both eyes during the drives, I got to see something, in flashes, of downtown Delhi, including the impressive Victorian central government buildings in sandstone the colour of pink curry.

Outside the Indian Air Force HQ in central Delhi was a vic of three Folland Gnats, climbing hard. Although they were as still as the concrete they were set in, they looked ready any moment to switch back in time and scramble into the heavens.

The Gnat was an experiment in fighter aircraft design, symbolising the light and agile against the trend for bigger payloads, ordnance, engines, technology and cost. It was also an example of cooperation be-

tween India and Britain, the type being manufactured in India by Hindustani.

As I looked at the three distinctive fighters I thought of the parallels with the Streak, in which small is also beautiful, and of the air force connection.

David Cook, who designed the Shadow back in the early '80s, was an RAF pilot at the time the Gnat was in service, and although he never flew it, I thought of how the Streak represented the same cost-effective solution to an aeronautical requirement: low cost, effective ab initio pilot training.

The tandem layout of the Streak, like the Gnat and later the Hawk and Tucano, is well suited to the military pilot training requirement, representing as it does from the outset the single-seat configuration. Most young men when they start in the air force dream of becoming fighter pilots, and the Streak's side stick and purposeful cockpit make it possible, with some stretching of the imagination, to fantasize oneself into a military combat machine.

I flew over the American base at RAF Lakenheath in England once and could believe myself to be in an F-16, but for the slight absence of speed and the indignant air traffic controller, who complained in a lazy drawl that she was danged if she could see me on radar.

That's another plus for the Streak in a military situation. Its radar footprint is minimal. It also has the advantage of being able to climb up to a considerable altitude. David Cook took a Shadow up to 27,000ft. From some high, invisible spot in the sky it can shut off its engine and carry out some very quiet surveillance, losing as little as 300ft/min.

During its life the Streak had been supplied for a variety of military applications. In the Middle East, two were specially adapted for high-altitude surveillance. They were equipped with under-belly protection from small-arms fire and had long-range tanks either side of the rear cockpit to enable them to lurk around for long periods at heights of around 20,000ft. One has to hope that in addition to the binoculars the crew were supplied with woolly socks and the occasional whiff of oxygen.

Back to earth. I found tight security enforced inside the HQ building, yet the corridors were lined their entire length by the same nomads I'd seen along the highways. Here they were squatting in exactly the same way, doing exactly the same amount of nothing, but quite busily.

The hotel restaurant, meanwhile had decided to salute four movie stars, namely Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable and Charlie Chaplin, by hiring a series of impersonators.

On my first night there, to the un-

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speakable horror of diners, none more horrified than I, there pranced into a floodlight a man dressed as Elvis, carrying a guitar and dancing as if he had been stricken with some species of palsy.

Naturally, he advanced on the one table at which he was least welcome, and asked me if I was enjoying dinner. Was I expected to give him some? If it was Elvis, was I expected to lace it with something? It was all too much.

On the following evening, it was Marilyn Monroe. At the top of the red carpeted steps, I asked the immaculate head waiter, a man whose presence, poise and appearance would have been the envy of Jeeves, when the entertainment was due to begin.

Without hesitation, or any change to his dignified expression, he said: "If you are very quick, sir, you can be finished before it begins at half past eight."

I bolted down the meal, and finished the last bite, just as I spied, out of the corner of one horrified eye, long blonde hair dangling over a distant table. In the rush to leave I failed to make out the sex of its owner.

The next morning, I moved to the Mela Plaza at a fraction of the price. It had hot water if you waited long enough, the air conditioning was broken and there was no plug in the basin, but at least it had no Clark Gable.

Security at AF Hindan was, at first, as tight as Shylock. For the first two days, I was interrogated and issued with a pass, but thereafter let through not only unchallenged but generally with a smile.

The first formal meeting was held on Wednesday 15 December in the underground air operations area.

Highly polished brass letters on a highly polished area of an otherwise neglected wooden door identified Wingco G's office. Inside, all was straight from the Bat-

tle of Britain, with status boards sharing wall space with the ubiquitous edicts exhorting pilots to greater vigilance and diligence.

The atmosphere of cool efficiency was only slightly marred by the presence of a large television in the corner showing Zimbabwe versus Sri Lanka.

Lunch took place on the contrastingly lush lawn in front of the clubhouse of the Air Force Hindan Golf Club. The sun blazed down. White linen tablecloths dazzled. Cool beer and curry were served.

Hosted by the chief, Air Commodore G, the occasion was to mark the arrival of the French air attaché and members of the *incroyable* Patrouille de France who were scheduled to give an air display in their Alpha Jets in February.

M Saget, team leader of the P de F, showed us a photo of six aircraft in formation: five Super Rallyes and a CAP 10 – his four children, himself and *une tante*, I think he said. His father had been Dassault chief test pilot for 22 years. Flying, it appeared, ran in the family.

Flying, of course, was also the essence of Air Force Hindan, from the total commitment and professionalism of the pilots and their ground crew to the battery of inspirational billboards along the floral central reservation of the 2 mile road from guardroom to control tower.

There was much to be learned from the seriously professional approach of each individual to the matter of flying, whether it was a leading aircraftman of the ground crew or an air marshal from High Command – as I found when on Friday 17 December I flew with the air marshal.

It was to be the most remarkable day of a remarkable adventure. □

- Next month: the strange case of the air marshal's turban



"ONE PARTICULAR DRIVER WOULD HAVE BEEN A TERROR IN PARIS OR MILAN, BUT HERE HE WAS LIKE THE TIMOROUS RUGGER PLAYER WHO THINKS CAUTION WILL SAVE HIM FROM HURT..."

Facing page
The author during pre-despatch testing at Parham (Framlingham) in Suffolk, his hair carefully chosen to blend in with Lynx headset and aircraft livery

Above
Streaks on test at Parham before delivery