

Passport to India

- Charlie Campbell

With its long periods in the field, cricket is a sport that involves more dreaming than most. And it is at that side of the game that a team of writers can truly excel. PG Wodehouse may never have scored a century at Lord's when he played there for the Authors. The nearest he got was writing about it in *Psmith in the City*. Meanwhile, his teammate Arthur Conan Doyle created an asthmatic school teacher whose freakish lob bowling propelled him into the England team and won them the Ashes. Conan Doyle's slow turners didn't take him as far, though he once had WG Grace caught at the wicket from a top-edged skier. So while neither writer ever quite realised their sporting dreams, they did play numerous times at Lord's. And most cricketers would settle for that.

Last summer, the new-look Authors were lucky enough to play there, a hundred years on from Wodehouse and Conan Doyle's last match. We were on the Nursery Ground, admittedly, but still, we were playing at the Home of Cricket. Times have moved on, however, and the MCC is no longer the sport's sole stronghold. Cricket, it pains me to admit, is not the national game in England. Instead, we have the mixture of sport and reality TV that is Premiership football. There we know almost as much about the players' personal lives as we do about their scoring records. But in India it is cricket that dominates. Rahul Dravid and Sachin Tendulkar are lionised, while we must cope with John Terry and Wayne Rooney. India has the climate for the game, whereas we have just suffered one of the wettest summers since records began. And they can play for most of the year, with only a short off-season during the monsoon, whereas our cricket season lasts for at best five rain-interrupted months.

In the depths of winter, surrounded by other sports, what could be more alluring than a tour of India? When William Dalrymple suggested that we open the Jaipur Literary Festival with a fixture against an XI featuring players from the Rajasthan Royals, we said yes before he could change his mind. International cricketers might complain of being away from their families and spend their days off in their rooms in front of their X-Boxes, downing Imodium capsules, but the Authors were altogether more enthusiastic. Flights

were booked, new bats purchased and the nets at Lord's were taken over by writers in the run-up to Christmas. Afterwards in the bar, we talked airily of how to play in the subcontinent, while watching both England and India struggle in the Tests against the turning ball. We flew out in January to Mumbai and within hours of landing opening batsman Sam Carter and I were at the Oval Maidan, enjoying nets with our host Digvijay Kathiwada and his club Osian's CC. There was more cricket going on than I'd ever seen before in one place, with a solitary game of football in the corner. This was what we'd come for. This is what we imagined India to be. I felt as much like Elizabeth Gilbert in *Eat, Pray, Love* as a deeply unspiritual person can. The last time I'd visited the country, I was a student on the verge of being sent down from Oxford. This time I came as a cricketer, the captain of a side even, with a kit bag to match. The assumption always is that you must be pretty good if you travel abroad to play a sport, bringing your own scorer and photographer. A delightful cricket-mad employee of Jet Airways certainly thought so, as he helped me through security, telling me how he'd met Ian Bell and Kevin Pietersen. I tried to explain that we were not quite at that level, despite having travelled 4,500 miles to play five games. But as Woody Allen famously said, 80% of success is showing up.

And show up we did at the historic Bombay Gymkhana ground, where we were playing our first game. This was the venue for the first-ever Test in India, against England in 1933. Douglas Jardine had captained the away team that day (and he would find himself leading the Authors two decades later). But I don't know if he had to deal with a large dead rat at deep mid-off as he took the field. As Tom Holland wisely observed, 'you don't have to have studied ancient history, as I have, to see this as a bad omen for our tour'. Thankfully a kite removed the rat carcass to the edge of the field, and tore at it hungrily during the opening overs. These went very well for us, as we reduced our youthful opposition to 18 for 5, with Nicholas Hogg taking three wickets and Richard Beard three fine slip catches.

It is at this point that Jardine would probably have moved to leg theory but I hauled off our strike bowlers, and the score began to mount. Even at 80 for 7, I wasn't regretting my decision but after 30 overs the score stood at 203 for 8 and we had a mountain to climb. We didn't even get halfway. I top-scored with a watchful 13 and we lost by some 150 runs. The *Mumbai Mirror* put it best – 'A group of Englishmen in varying states of fitness lost a game of cricket to the Bombay Gymkhana Under-19 side on Wednesday.' But we'd had a

great day, playing at a beautiful ground against a delightful and talented opposition and we did have four more matches in which to notch up the single victory we hoped for.

We returned to the Cricket Club of India, where we were staying. All hotels should have their own cricket pitch, I decided. The CCI also had a physiotherapist who dealt with our creaking bodies ahead of our first-ever day/night game, against Osian's CC. We lost this and our next two fixtures – an exciting T20 in Jodhpur against a Maharaja's XI and an unforgettable match in the desert outside Roher, where we were greeted with drums and garlands of flowers. (Imagine the film *Lagaan*, with less evil Englishmen.) In these games, we competed valiantly and we had our moments, including a stunning 62-ball century under lights from children's writer Joe Craig but we were usually outclassed by sides who could call on batsmen with experience of representative cricket. Ed Smith, our former international, could perhaps have made the difference, but he was in Australia covering the tennis.

And so after four defeats, we travelled to Jaipur to play the one game we had no chance of winning. We knew that Sreesanth was captaining the Royals XI and there were rumours that Shaun Tait was flying in to play. Few of us had brought helmets or even thigh pads but these concerns were swept away by the reception that we got at the KL Saini ground. We were greeted by elephants, dancers and a pipe band, garlanded with yet more flowers and crowned with smart blue turbans for the pre-match photo. For the toss, Sreesanth and I rode onto the pitch on stately dromedaries, as serried ranks of cameras snapped away. I managed both to stay on my mount and call tails correctly and decided to bat first for the only time this tour. I don't usually have to explain these decisions to assembled journalists but I muttered something about it being time for a change and Sam and Joe went into face Sreesanth, wearing our only two helmets.

As it turned out, the protective gear wasn't necessary. The Royals' skipper sportingly bowled leg spin, some 30mph slower than usual. Sam and James Holland made the vital contributions for us, each almost reaching their age in runs, as we posted a respectable 120-odd off our twenty overs. The Royals' keeper Dishant Yagnik had shown impressive all-round skills, taking a hat-trick (of which I was the middle victim).

The first ball of the Royals' innings was every bit as ominous as the rat in our first match, as Nick was driven for six over wide long off. The same shot off the fourth ball produced the same result, and when I was hit for 25 runs by my opposite number in the fourth over, the game was pretty much up. Tom Holland did dismiss the Prince of Udaipur in the last over, but we lost by 7 wickets. Afterwards we all received medals and our third trophy of the tour and had no time to dwell on our defeat as the Jaipur literary festival opened with a splendid party at the Rambagh Palace.

So, we may not have won a game but we enjoyed a magical fortnight away from the snow in England. We'd fulfilled the dream of so many cricketers, of the tour abroad, and bonded further as a side. And cricket proved the perfect passport to India, as we were greeted with kindness and enthusiasm everywhere we went. We stayed in beautiful hotels (our scorer Laura Jeffrey doubles as a travel agent) and one of their staff even fielded for us in Jodhpur. No one ever asked us why we were here, why these Sunday cricketers were competing against the very best, but it gradually became clear that our level of cricket doesn't thrive everywhere. A few days after the match, the driver taking me to the airport asked me if England was an elephant-less land. It is I replied. He looked sad for a moment and I was too.