

The grass is greener

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December 2, 2002

I get interesting reactions when I tell people that I moved to Goa for the grass. But it's true — I did. And what a high it's been! My two cats had been picked up off the road in Bombay and brought up in a flat. It never struck me that they had really never walked on grass until they came to Goa.

Frazzled from a long air journey, jumpy and nervous, it took ages to coax them out of their cage. One step and they leaped in the air, twin exclamation points of surprise. Then they explored, one questing paw at a time. Few steps. Quick retreat. Another couple of steps. What is this stuff?!

Grass?? For the next three days we couldn't get them back in the house. They ran in it, rolled in it, pulled it up in chunks, ambushed each other, chewed meditatively on it, and, above all, rubbed longingly, luxuriously against it. Ah! Grass! It's a scary thought that children in Bombay grow up without ever really having grass under their feet.

It's not just the grass that is greener. The air smells funny as well. I sniffed suspiciously for three days before I figured what it was — or rather wasn't. No smell of exhaust fumes. And was it my imagination, but was everything changing colour? It was. In Bombay we view things through a perspective that is tinged with the haze of smog and dust.

Out of the city everything looks like it's just been washed clean. The better living comes home to you in strange ways. Instead of having to throw away my disposable contact lenses in 15 days, I can now use them for a whole month. I had to switch hairbrushes because the texture of my hair changed entirely. And I stopped getting coughs and colds.

What takes getting used to the most is the lack of people. Go for a walk, and in about half-an-hour of walking you might come across another couple of people on the road. Used to being packed in like a sardine in the train, jammed against other walkers on the road, squeezed by the rush hour, I found the sheer lack of people disconcerting. There's just you.

And your idea of yourself and the space you occupy is changing. The houses are larger. Your territory suddenly has a far horizon. I first noticed it in my paintings. Unconsciously I was painting lower horizons, vaster vistas, human figures that stretched out luxuriantly across the canvas. My entire visual dictionary and internal canvas had entirely changed.

The way you listen changes. Every conversation in Bombay is underpinned by the background noise of traffic. No matter how late at night, no matter how quiet it gets, there will always be the deep low static of traffic moving somewhere in the background.

You learn to switch on your filters, to concentrate down and isolate only what you want to hear. In Goa you are always being distracted. What is that singing in the mango tree? A new bird? Oh the monkeys are pattering on the roof again. There go the neighbours' dogs.

That day that I watched the cats cavort, I understood how much a city can dictate your life and experiences. If you want a real high out of life, get out and get on grass.