



Banana Talk

By Ethan Gelber

*photo by Ethan Gelber;
Camel-trekking in the Thar Desert*



By cupping my hands to my temples and looking straight up into the night sky, I could obliterate from view the orange glow and the sandy periphery of the camp. My view was filled only with the magnificent ebony black of the pre-moon evening, speckled with stars trembling through the dissipating heat of the desert. The Milky Way gave infinite depth to the expanse. I felt like there was nothing to hold me to the ground. Truly, I was falling into space.

I had climbed to the top of an empty dune in the Thar Desert of western Rajasthan in northwestern India. It was the second of four nights on a camel trek out of Jaisalmer. My brother and his girlfriend were back trying to speak with Indra and Chandra, our two guides. I could faintly hear my brother tease, "Oh no, tourist banana no good tonight. Camel make tourist banana flat." A thick wheeze-and-snicker tangle, the simultaneous and unmistakable laughter of the two guides rolled up the sand hill, loosening a few grains which rolled back into the fireside.

"Yesterday, real banana. Today, only banana pancake."

Wedged into tight leather saddles strapped across the narrow of the camels' backs, my brother and I had been suffering considerable discomfort for the second day. Indra had finally queried us about the state of our "bananas" after an hour's trot had rendered us speechless and incapable of an unaided dismount. Now it was the major topic of conversation, something everyone could understand and laugh about.

I stuffed my thumbs into my ears, keeping my fingers splayed like blinds in an effort to keep out the light and to hush the winds and banana talk. I could feel only the curve of the dune top pushing my belly to the sky. A single slide of sand tickled the back of my neck and reminded me of the grit in my mouth that would probably be with me until the end of the trip. Smelling nothing but a mixture of what did not seem like smells and can only be described as dryness, I lavished in the aridness of the land around, and was overwhelmed again by the silence, the fullness of the extended horizon, and my own easy satisfaction.

"How many Americans have been here before?" I whispered to myself. "How many have been lucky enough to lie here, conqueror of so much - thirst, camel commands, saddle soreness, flat bananas - and feel, actually submit to and accept, the ferocity of limitless space?" I was certainly not equating my victory over discomfort with the belittling force of the galaxy, but I was proud of how I was doing. Out of my element, I felt I was faring comparatively well, living with the muscle ache, making no requests of the guides, suffering my thirst, as Lawrence of Arabia had, to drink only when they did. In fact, I was

even pushing to be of service to the guides. Early on, Indra and Chandra had set a standard, with which I was none too pleased and whereby they did all the work. We were paying customers and should play the part. But I refused. I wanted to help. Actually, it was more than sheer generosity that motivated me to help. When the guides worked - unpacked, cooked, fed the camels, packed, etc. - I was jealous. I wanted to continue my conquest of the desert, to learn to survive as they did, cooking curry and chapati over small brushwood fires, mastering the camel's trot. I wanted a piece of this remote and harsh corner of the world

I turned my gaze away from the stars, down to the now silent camp below. Two small fires threw a circle of light around them that splashed up against the hides of the resting camels. My brother, easily marked, even at night, by the ghostly blue of the turban material amaturely lumped and stretched across his hair, sat at some distance arm-in-arm with his girlfriend. Chandra was kneeling over a thin board expertly kneading and dividing a wad of dry dough that would be rolled into more chapati than anyone could eat. Indra busied himself with boiling water for the rice and chopping vegetables for the curry. A noise: the camels, kneeling on the thick leather pads at their leg joints and across their sternum, bellowed at one another, belching noxious flatus into the sweet parch of the sand. I could never get over feeling that their gazes, when they fell upon me, seethed with contempt. Their beautiful long lashes and heavy round, almost drunken eyes added to the guilt I felt at having to use them as pack animals. Until the nearest one would let loose with pungent punctuation, the result of a high fiber feast. The spell would always be broken.

I tumbled down the dune in a shower of shifting quartz shards and offered my services to whomever would have them. There was no response. I turned my attention to Chandra, and watched the practiced swiftness of the patty-forming process. I asked him again if I could help. This time, he thankfully refused, as he had the night before and probably to every tourist on every other trip before that. I tried to impress upon him how much I wanted practice in the making of bread in the desert. He turned his head, mumbled something unintelligible, and wagged his head in the infuriating Indian way that I had grown to appreciate.

"Would it be wrong for me to try?" I pursued. "Is there some reason why I can't help, or is it simply that you would prefer I didn't?"

Indra, the more gregarious and better-spoken of the two, looked up from the boiling water. Through the steam, a sharp orange grin of teeth flashed, clashing with the pucker red of his betel-stained gums. "Tourist banana no good for chapati making," he joked. "Now too flat. Only Indian banana working now." He grinned again through the glow.

I tried to insist. "No, I feel fine. And all I want to do is give it a little try."

"No, not possible today. Must make very fast or no chapati. You tourist not make chapati in America, so not need to make chapati here."

"But, Chandra, I just want..."

There was little point in finishing the sentence. Chandra had turned his face to me and was making no effort to hide his true contempt. He began with a low growl that grew quickly into a high-pitched spit.

"No chapati making."

I stood, thwarted. I had been caught off guard by the intensity of Chandra's response and was trying to understand from where it had come. I looked for an answer from Indra whose face was purposefully hidden and whose attention was devoted to the curry. I thought of saying something but realized it would

do no good. The fires crackled. A distinct low gurgle from a camel closed the debate.

From the state of preparation, it would be another 20 minutes before we settled down to eat, so I climbed back to my perch atop the dune in the middle of the sky. I ran through the conversation, trying to analyze the words, trying to understand my feelings.

All I had hoped for was to complete my desert survival course and make bread. Was that so much to ask? I stopped and began to count the thousands of stars, and the obvious response, of which I had even been aware earlier, was brought home.

God, I have been a fool. A true American fool, out to conquer the world unconcerned by the thoughts and acts to be vanquished. I also realized just how Indian Chandra had been, to want to maintain his own environment, and felt ashamed.

I sat up and looked down. My brother had returned and dug a banana out of the food bag. He was demonstrating the effects of the camel trot to his small captivated audience. Even the camels seemed to appreciate his glib intervention. He stood with his legs spread wide like a sumo wrestler, his arms held out grasping invisible camel reins. He was bellowing "Djo! Djo!" the command we had been practicing, that sometimes induced the camels to sit. His imaginary animal pitched forward abruptly. My brother took the banana and, squeezing it from the bottom, slowly pushed the soft pulp out through fissures in the brown-yellow peel. Indra and Chandra were again wheezing and snickering, "flat tourist banana," between breaths.

Nestling myself back into the spine-fitting cradle I had dug at my dune top, I spread my arms, grasped invisible stars, and fell back into the sky.

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