

Travelogue India August 2008

23.08.2008 - 29.08.2008

After a few weeks of preparation I left on 23rd of August 2008 for my plane from Nuremberg to Munich from where Lufthansa would bring me further to Bombay in India to see the legendary GTS Finnjet a last time at the beach of Alang. Alang is the world's biggest scrapping yard, located at the west coast of India in the state of Gujarat. A few hours earlier Mathias and Martin had already left Frankfurt with Qatar Airways. While I was already listening to the sounds of the Lufthansa on board program, Salomon left Helsinki with Finnair and Paul headed for South Asia from London with British Airways.

After having arrived at sticky and hot Bombay, we left the airport with a typical Bombay taxi for our hotel in the city. We had chosen a fairly cheap accommodation since most members of our group are still students without any big income. During this taxi trip we also drove through the biggest slum of Asia with approximately one million inhabitants, which was very depressing to



2: Motor rickshaw

see for us. After a few hours the whole group had arrived at the hotel and we left for exploring Bombay. Since we had only little time for Bombay, we concentrated on a few highlights like the



1: Gate of India

“Gate of India”. In our opinion however, the city itself is the biggest tourist attraction. Cows on the streets, thousands of taxis, red traffic lights which are ignored by everybody, rickshaws and traders everywhere. After a mandatory visit of McDonalds for lunch (“Chicken Maharaja Mac”), of course without any beef, we allowed ourselves our first Indian dinner in the evening in a still quite western-style pub. Due to our relatively short stay in India and the forthcoming journey to

Alang, nobody wanted to take the risk of any digestive problems, because of this the restaurant was quite a good choice. In India prices for a high quality dinner are about 3-5 euro.

The next day we headed back for the airport; this time for the domestic terminal though, which was very comfortable compared to the international terminal - which does definitely not comply with international

standards. Indeed the international terminal is quite a daunting experience for visitors arriving from Europe. Air Deccan, an Indian low-cost-carrier brought us to Bhavnagar, a ½ million city, which is



3: Paul in front of ATR of Air Deccan

located about 370 miles or 600 km north-west of Bombay. There we got to know an Indian lady who had been sitting next to Martin in the plane. She was so friendly to offer us a ride to the hotel because she had her own driver waiting at the airport and enough space in the car. During the bumpy ride the woman explained to us that she and her fellow countrymen would still be living in the Stone Age compared to Europe. The ride was often interrupted by cows which were resting on the street. Unlike most of her countrymen, she had visited Europe several times, since she is manufacturing pens for Rotring in her own factory. From our Hotel „Blue Hill“ at Bhavnagar, which was probably the 2nd best choice after the Palace Hotel, we started to explore the city by foot. Despite the very friendly people – in Bhavnagar mostly without English skills – we soon realized that we should not stay very long standing on the same place. Five Europeans with many digital- and video cameras just attracted too much attention. It was a bitter experience to see little children, begging for some money for rice, just wearing rags and no shoes.

Due to a very bad telephone connection to “Rishi”, the scrapping yard in Alang, me and others had big doubts if we would ever see the ship again. All our requests at the Indian embassy and the ministries in Delhi remained unanswered. Foreigners are only allowed to the scrapping yard zone in Alang after paying a fee of 25 USD and having an authorization from the authorities since environment protests from western countries. On the second day in Bhavnagar we finally got through to an employee of Rishi with our European mobile phones. Calls with Indian



4: Cow at Bhavnagar street

fixed network often resulted in abruption.

A driver, recommended by our friend from the plane, brought us with a (for Indian means) quite luxury jeep to Alang at five o'clock in the afternoon. The 50 km trip required about 1 ½ hours of time and although the road was made out of asphalt, the ride was a little bumpy. Several times we were interrupted by cows, once also a bull which jumped in front of our car while going approx. 50km/h. This was commented by the driver, now we could see his three teeth, with a loud and joyfull "THIS IS INDIA!!!!". Anybody who has been to India can surely imagine what I am talking about. Anyhow some of us had almost beads of perspiration on the forehead when the driver was overtaking other cars in curves, overtaking other cars which were themselves overtaking cars. Temporarily there were three cars, diverse cows, bicyclists and mopeds abreast on two lanes. The horn, in India the most important part of a vehicle, is besides also in use although no other traffic participants are in sight. After a while however one gets used to these specialities.

After some time we arrived at the hitherto mysterious location Alang and the driver started to choose narrow routes through woods and grassland, obviously trying not to attract too much attention. From the windows we could observe some kind of commercial area with traders specialized on any kind of ship parts. Unfortunately we could not make any pictures here but there are traders for every part of a ship one can imagine. One trader is specialized in rescue boats which are used by local fisherman; others sell doors with glass or stainless steel kitchens. Suddenly the driver started to make an inscrutable hand signal and after some time we realized that he wanted us to stoop for the next five minutes when passing the police station. Short time before this we could already see Finnjets funnels through palms and dumps. This reminded me very much on earlier journeys with Finnjet when driving through northern German alleys to Travemünde. The same sight I should now see during the journey to Alang instead of contemplative Travemünde. After a while, we still hid our heads behind the front seats, the doors of the jeep were opened and we heard hectic Indian discussions. We thought already about police men standing there with machine guns, the border to Pakistan is not very far away, but we were just asked to move quickly to the courtyard of Rishi Ship Breakers. Having arrived there, being really perplex, we had finally arrived at the destination of our long journey and saw Finnjet, cursorily with some rust and without Silja logos standing on the beach. Since it was not completely low tide there was some water around the ship and we had to wait some time in Rishis little booth. If Rishi would have beached Finnjet with gas turbines and full power the booth would not stand there anymore, as Mathias correctly stated. Since both gas turbines were dismantled already earlier, there was only the power of two old diesel machines (12,5 knots) for beaching the ship, otherwise this would have happened with up to 33 knots. After low tide had proceeded, we walked to the ship with our rucksacks across the beach. Only then I realized that we would have to climb up a very high ladder and that we would not be brought to the ship by a boat (some parts of the ship further back were still a little bit swimming). The ladder consisted of three smaller ladders, banded with some rags. Shortly later I was already standing on this ladder and climbing up to Finnjets cardeck, into which the



[5: View on Finnjet in Alang](#)



7: Finnjet at beach of Alang

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Indians had obviously cut some holes with a blowpipe.

From here we explored the ship with our Indian guide and a torch, lastly the ship was without any light. The guide showed us the different parts of the ship which we already knew of course ourselves. Inside the ship it was incredibly hot and the interior was in a quite chaotic condition. Very sad was also to see the bridge without radio equipment. As we heard on board, Indian customs officials had destroyed this equipment. The two months that the ship had been staying in Alang had already caused quite a big damage to the ship, at least inside. The ship had arrived in Alang right in the beginning of monsoon time and been lying on the beach without any air-conditioning. All kinds of materials such as carpets, wood or leather had from then on started to mould. The contrast could hardly be starker compared to the condition of the ship in 2004 when Silja Line had refurbished Finnjet for 15 MEUR. Except for quickly exploitable goods like glasses, chairs or IT and entertainment

equipment there was all interior of the ship left, of course all in chaotic condition, in cabins as well as in public areas. Later we had the idea that probably also here the customs had searched through the whole ship. The border to Pakistan is not very far away from Alang and a ship like Finnjet is probably quite suitable for all kinds of smuggling. In some bathrooms the towels were still hanging at their places as if the ship would



6: Bridge of Finnjet

head for Helsinki one day later. A short view through the windows of Commodore Class in the direction of Alang beach brought us back to reality quite quickly.

Since the ship was without electricity, we could also access all areas which used to be reserved for the crew, all doors were now open. The officers mess, in proper style of the 70s, the big kitchen for the former Helsinki Restaurant, which we had to leave



8: View from window of Stadust Night Club

quite fast because of an enormous stink, the engine room (gas turbines gone and sold back to Pratt & Whitney) or the sun deck of the crew underneath the radar mast. Here we rested a little bit in old deck chairs. Walking around the ship with around 30°C and a humidity of almost 100% with rucksacks was incredibly exhausting. In addition we only had the weak light of our torch. An accident like a fracture of a leg would have been a big problem for us since there was only the way back down the ladder. There were also other dangers at this ghost ship, which we did not realize all the time. Suddenly there was a little smell of gas in the engine room and the Indian guide started to move quickly with us into another area.

After a short break at deck with Indian crisps and many liters of water and a last Finnish Koskenkorva farewell drink we went to the bridge and to the rooms of the officers and of the captain which are located right behind the bridge. We were very surprised to find all kinds of old documents, even from the original yard. Even hardcopies of emails of this year and passage plans were on the premises. From safety plans to files with documentations about every repair yard stay or old video tapes we could save some stuff after hours of work in the night and buy from the scrapyards for about 5 USD / kilo. In the end we just spent the whole night on Finnjet sorting this stuff and looking for other interesting documents. Around 5:30 in the morning there was the next low tide period and we could leave the ship down the very groggy ladder. Much to our amazement our driver was already waiting behind the booth and brought us back to Bhavnagar. Exhausted, but feeling quite happy having reached our final destination, we took some sleep back in the hotel.



9: Martin Rogge, Kai Knocke, Paul Byrne, Mathias Saken, Salomon Kaukiainen - © Martin Rogge 2008

The next day we left Bhavnagar with our low-cost-airline back to Mumbai. This time we took another hotel which was supposed to be nearer to the airport. However, the daily traffic jam in Mumbai thwarted our plan. In return we saw some nice restaurants at the opposite of our hotel and we took the opportunity and tried some more authentic Indian food. Our daily ration consisted in the meantime at least out of Indian garlic nan bread. Surprisingly the most expensive food led to digestive problems at some persons. During the whole journey we didn't luckily have to face any kind of these problems. Around 10 o'clock in the evening I left for Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport. Of course I had packed my only pen into my suitcase, thus I had to walk through the whole airport again to organize a pen for the disembarkation form. The chaos continued at the gate which was changed within ten minutes for three times. Every time one could notice a group of passengers walking from one gate to the new gate and then back when it was changed again. Finally I was quite happy to sit in my Austrian Airlines airplane back to Vienna, listening to Mozart and having a nice dinner. Meanwhile the others had one more beer in the restaurant near to the hotel and followed me back to Europe a little bit later with other flights.

About 9 o'clock in the morning I reached my home in northern Bavaria (town of Erlangen near Nuremberg) and as often the experiences made are a little bit surrealistic after such a long journey in short time (about six days) and as I hear the others have same kinds of feelings. Finally we have experienced besides Finnjet also a piece of India, only a little one.

However – after knowing now that the destiny of Finnjet is decided we are very happy that we took the opportunity and made the long way until Alang. I have accepted Finnjets destiny. At this point I want to quote Juha Rautavirta, former captain of Finnjet, from a mail which he wrote to Mathias: of course it is sad, but still Finnjet has brought her whole life crew and passengers safely from one place to another, without bigger accidents involving hundreds of injured or even death people.

For me Finnjet was for 24 years the connection from Germany to my second home country Finland, for others 31 years and for others only one or two journeys – it does not matter: the lovely memories will stay at all friends of Finnjet for a long time.

In this spirit: Hyvästi, GTS FINNJET!¹

Kai Markus Knocke

Erlangen in september 2008

Alle photos © Kai Knocke 2008 aside from extra marked photos. More information available at my blog www.kailino.de and at Mathias' www.finnjetweb.com.

¹ Farewell, Finnjet!