

International Herald Tribune | THE GLOBAL EDITION OF THE NEW YORK TIMES

IHT Rendezvous

DECEMBER 28, 2012, 6:50 PM

Home for the Holidays, or Not: The Ultimate Holiday Escape

By **ALLISON WILLIAMS**

Thank you for your responses to [our call](#) for expat holiday posts. We received funny and sad, heart-wrenching and heartwarming posts and comments.

This is our last December holiday post. Now on to the new year - at least the Western, Julian one). Send us your guest posts or comment below about where you plan to ring in 2013, or where you spent your most memorable New Year's Eve.

Christmas for me is stressful enough that I spend it out of the country whenever possible. Spain or Mexico, with beautiful lights and Christmas markets in cathedral squares, are good compromises - I get the pretty parts of the season, but whatever commercialism is happening is in a language I don't speak. But the best bet is somewhere in the developing world where December 25th is a holiday for only a handful of people.

That's where I spent Christmas last year.

Forbesganj is almost at the Nepali border, in the northeast corner of Bihar, India's poorest state. It's an overnight train ride from Calcutta then a three-hour 4X4 ride from Katihar, on bumpy roads and dirt tracks, dodging cows, dogs, donkeys, buses and pedestrians. Tourists don't come here, and my four-woman group is on a mission for an NGO, doing outreach in a nearby village. We're based in Forbesganj, staying in the hotel - there's one - using the internet café - there's two - and making daily trips out to the village.

Everywhere we go, we are stared at. Not with hostility, or even much curiosity. "As if we are zebras," I email my mother.

When we walk down the street, eyes follow us, the looks on local faces saying something like, Huh, would you look at that. Zebras. We don't get many zebras around here.

We sit on the hotel roof terrace and drink chai, brought up from the stand on the street below by a young boy who comes back later to pick up the cups. As we drink, men gather on the second floor balcony outside the movie theatre across the street, level with our terrace, and observe us. The zebras are drinking tea.

Our mission isn't going terribly well. Even with an interpreter, the concepts we're trying to express are too large, too outside the experience of the people we're hoping to help. Christmas morning dawns chilly and clear, another day of street goats dressed in human sweaters against the cold, thali plates of curry and dal for lunch, chai on the roof while being stared at. We're waiting for an answer from the village to come via phone, an answer we're pretty sure is going to be "no."

In the evening, the call still hasn't come, and I say, "Hey, let's do something Christmasy, OK?" Back home, when the post-dinner stupor sets in, we either take a walk or go to the movies. And the movie theatre across the street is playing *Don II*, the Hindi-language blockbuster sequel with Shahrukh Khan, the biggest movie star in the world.

We join the ticket line - Zebras are coming to our movie, say the stares - and the manager rescues us, taking us to his office and issuing us with tickets fetched by his assistant. Men gather at the doorway and stare (*Zebras!* Right there in the office!) until the manager sweeps a curtain across the opening.

"When does the movie start?" I ask.

"Whenever you are ready," the manager says.

We are escorted to reserved seats in the balcony, admiring the ornate, pressed-tin ceiling painted purple. After we sit, the doors are opened and the theatre fills up completely, men rushing just a little to sit in the seats immediately around us.

It's an action movie - high speed chases, bank robberies, a hot FBI agent. It's not subtitled. At intermission, our interpreter asks, "Are you understanding any of this at all?"

I say, "The white guys on the boat are angry that Don's closing in on their drug-dealing territory. The hot FBI agent is still in love with Don even though he betrayed her in the last movie, and her nerdy co-worker is secretly in love with her himself. Don's planning a prison break-out in Singapore with a fake food-poisoning plan, and then he's going to rob the German bank with help from his old crime syndicate."

The interpreter is astonished. I say, "It's not that hard to follow, it's an action movie!"

After the movie, we go into the street and my colleagues cross to the hotel. I'm hungry again, and there's an egg cart outside the theatre. I point and ask for "one," guessing I'll find out one what in a minute.

The vendor cracks an egg into a metal tumbler, throws in a handful of chopped coriander and onion and mixes it with a wooden rod. He pours the mix onto the round, blackened metal griddle over a gas flame, deftly flips it once, slides it with a spatula onto a square of newspaper, sprinkles beet salad into the middle and rolls it into a little burrito. It is hot

and spicy and herb-filled and delicious. I stand for a moment with the small group of omelet-eaters, listening as amplified music and megaphone shouting comes down the street. A political demonstration passes us, orange flags and teenagers and young men in matching white-and-orange t-shirts. We all watch as they pass by.

The man next to me jerks his head at me and points to the marchers. He says something in one of the local languages. I nod, and gesture to the parade. "Zebras," I say. "Don't see many of them around here."