

It was dim and cool in the airport waiting lounge, with the smell of stale coffee pushing its way through. Strange how the smell of roasting beans makes you salivate but used coffee reminds you of unwashed loos.

I looked up at the departure board – Cathay Pacific flight CP576 to Mumbai, boarding gate open in 20 minutes. My heart lifted and then dropped; much like the skyrockets I was dreading.

It was October and we were heading back to India for three weeks over Diwali. It was supposed to be a joyous homecoming – we hadn't visited since we had made the giant leap to New Zealand five years ago and there were some old relatives about to breathe their last. What better time to spread the joy than during Diwali, the Christmas for Indians?

I know there are people who scrimp and save desperately, organise their children's holidays and annual leave so they can be in India during the Festival of Lights.

But for me, it's more the Festival of Unnecessarily Loud Bangs. It escapes logic why in India, lighting fireworks is a part of Diwali, often a couple of weeks before the day, any time of the day and night.

When we lived in India, I did not look forward to Diwali like other festivals. Sure, there was a dizzying variety of sweet and savoury food on offer, we had three weeks off school and Diwali always meant new clothes and toys.

But Diwali also meant fireworks. My family and friends would be on the roof or out on the street lighting enough fireworks to create a thick, black smoke that obscured their faces and often there would be a yelp as someone stepped on unseen hot firework litter.

I would be sitting in the room furthest away from the action, cotton wool in my ears and the thickest scarf I could find wrapped around my head. If I was cool enough, I would've had a Walkman to drown out the bangs. Oh, how I loathed the invention of fireworks.

For those thinking, 'Harden up!' I invite them to view the fireworks India has on offer compared to the ones here in Aotearoa. Fireworks sold in New Zealand include Roman candles, ground and wall spinners, fountains, cones, sparklers, and various novelties, such as smoke bombs and Pharaoh's serpents; they're available only during Guy Fawkes, and only to those 18 years of age and older.

In India, there are skyrockets that fly into apartment blocks and set fire to people's dusty net curtains; Catherine wheels that spin out of control and burn people's feet; 'atom bombs' which are tightly wound in green string, looking conspicuously harmless but would make you believe you're in the middle of a warzone once they start going off; and possibly the worst of all – 'lavangi' – a row of small red firecrackers that sound like a rifle going off. 'Lavangi' lines can stretch for metres, rat-a-tatting for minutes on end and these are the ones that have my teeth set on edge even as I think about them.

As if being terrified of loud bangs wasn't enough, I also had to deal with the ridicule that inadvertently came when people learnt I wasn't a fan of a national pastime. It was almost like not enjoying strawberry lamingtons (which I do) or loathing rugby (which I don't).

I remember the joy I felt as I heard there were no 'lavangis' or 'atom bombs' in New Zealand. For the last five years, I'd been happily going to Wellington's waterfront, skipping almost, to watch the display of beautiful fireworks over the water. Families with little children and couples enjoying a romantic evening, blankets spread out, the explosions up above throwing a light on their awed faces. Sounds you heard were a dull 'thud' as the rocket exploded and then a collective 'Oooh...'

Dreaming of silent starbursts and pretty lights, I took my seat, my mum on one side who immediately took airsickness pills, put ear plugs in and told me not to wake her but to make sure I saved all the food from her meal tray for when she does arise.

The man on the other side was an elderly Indian and asked me if I was going back for Diwali. I glumly said yes. He nodded, misinterpreting my sorrow because he looked at me kindly and said, "I know how you feel. Going back for Diwali won't be the same now that they've banned fireworks."

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