

PARENTSCOPE

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Fertility waters

Parents of boys may have been concerned by reports that oestrogens in recycled sewage (which make their way into the nation's tap water via the -ahem- waste products of women taking the Pill) are turning all the boy fish in our rivers into lady fish. So you may feel it wise to skip the school-fee fund and divert your savings into a "If we're going to be grandparents we'll need to pay-for-fertility-treatment fund" instead. Or you could stock up on mineral water, from Christmas 2003, bottled waters that meet the right World Health Organisation criteria will, for the first time, carry labels saying whether or not they are suitable for giving to infants. In the meantime, the Natural Mineral Water Information Service has a new leaflet listing brands safe for children: to get one, send an SAE to PO Box 6, Hampton, Middx, TW20 2HH.

Tearaway teens

In the interests of forward planning, new parents might consider paying a visit to the Business Design Centre in Islington, north London, this week, where the National Family and Parenting Institute (www.nfpi.org) is holding a two-day conference on coping with teenagers. While it's largely aimed at academics, teachers and health professionals, this Thursday a panel including the psychologist and broadcaster Dr Oliver James and the journalist Maureen Freely will be inviting parents to discuss the nightmare that is adolescence. So if your teenager looks in danger of turning into a one-child crime-wave, go along: entrance is free.

Spare any change?

Finally, if the Easter holidays have left your children's piggy banks rather depleted, send them in the direction of www.bbc.co.uk/shortchange, the website for the consumer series *Short Change*, which returns to CBBC this Thursday at 7pm. The perfect time to ask for a pence for more cash, it includes advice on saving money, a game that shows how many learn about foreign currencies, and a challenge to find the lowest and highest-priced product in the country - this week, it's disposable cameras. You'll make miles of them yet.

ate summer last year - 15 August. In India it's Independence Day but far away in England, in the operating theatre of the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, I'm having my baby delivered by c-section. India as a self-preservation strategy for early motherhood is nowhere in my head. My son Alexander Augustus (or AA), unaware of his auspicious birth date, is born to an unmarried single parent, a travel writer longing to get travelling again, with that quite common first-time-mother expectation that babies (or at least your own baby) will slot in, and motherhood, if I'll vent with any profession, would go with writing.

Looking back now, I think it took me only a few days before I realised that this wasn't going to be the case. I don't remember the exact day that I began to fantasise about nurseries and nannies but I do remember putting calls through to agencies and willing at unaffordable costs (an average of 2900 per month for full-day care - surely only for the wealthy with double incomes). All the well-intentioned plans of coparenting with my ex-partner had long evaporated with his distraction with another girlfriend and, during the increasing panic of single parenting and the slog, boredom and claustrophobia of early motherhood, my India dream was born: a flat with an am- some domestic help - to travel with baby and ayah in Rajasthan and send copy back home.

As I told disbelieving friends, it wasn't such an unlikely prospect; having spent time in India before, I know anything is possible and, sure enough, one call to a reliable travel agency in Jaipur (with a promise of commission) to enquire about a flat and ayah sets the ball rolling: someone knows someone whose daughter's husband's family are looking to rent the top-floor flat of their posh two-storey house. It's all mod cons and, if

A baby named after me

I want, for a bit extra I can share their servants and cook and house. Total: £250 a month. For a dollar an hour I can use their car and driver. The ayah would cost £20 but more because that would be "spolting". (Spoiling her, not me: ayahs have a low status here, strange for a country that loves babies.) The flat is private but they can't wait to meet my baby. They add for social space that they are Rajputa: time-honoured aristocrats of Rajasthan.

Oddly, squaring our departure with relatives was far more difficult. As a solution, some said (using the ones without children), it's dramatic; as a practical proposal, dangerous: what if I get cholera, or malaria, what if I was trembled by a camel, or by an elephant and what, oh what, about the lepers?

We have, however, been here in Jaipur for three months now - in our mod-cons flat with veranda and view of camel herds and my ayah and sweeper and regular meals - and so far the only untoward skin manifestations

are AA's cheeks, regularly pinched from pale English skin to a pomegranate scarlet by a baby-adoring staff and family. Rajasthan, it turns out, is willing to act as one vast baby crèche.

This was my first India-baby lesson. Strangers in the street have taken him with-out asking, taxi drivers have cuddled and crooned, waiters dangled their turbans. Foreign mother and baby in India - immediately a point of interest. My family nicknamed him the Maharaja of Vijay Pathi (the road where we live), but now simply call him Al! Baba. He's always being given toys, people try to give him full masala sweets and of course, far from having our privacy it's been, I'm glad to say, more or less a ball.

Only yesterday afternoon, for example, I lost AA. Hunted through the flat until finally I saw him on the lawn, literally the centre of attention as the staff sat around him in a circle in the shade. AA being handed round like a pass-the-parcel between the two cooks, the two drivers, the

Faced with life as a single mother, it didn't take SOPHIE JAMES long to work out that life would be sweeter in India, where she discovered a nation of babysitters

nice man who brings Alexander's dhal up for lunch, Sonia's his ayah, and a man I call Mr. Telephone, whose job seems to be... answering the telephone. We might, I thought looking onto this harmonious scene, be a single-parent family, but here at least we're part of a most joyfully extended community.

Of course, there are aspects I hadn't bargained for.

I'm actually on my second ayah. The first took pride of her charge one step too far and tried an albeit temporary and good-willed abduction to show him off to her mud-but family home and family cow. It was a relief really, as she had never been the Rajasthan Mary Poppins of my fantasies. Not only was she frequently to be found playing with AA's toys, on her first morning she had requisitioned his carefully packed sheepskin for her own but on the veranda floor servants

But now I have Sonia. Sweet, gentle - and - Sonia, and Sonia's daughter Shweta, who

should be on the wage slip for the hours of peak-a-booo she puts in with AA.

Sonia arrives at nine, is covered in dhal and dribble by lunch and works seven days a week, flexible hours. No dropping off at the creche, no separation anxiety (AA is usually as he is now while I write, on the veranda when earshot, trying with Sonia to bring down cycles as they round the corner, astonished to see a white baby dangled over the terrace. Sonia speaks no English, I speak no Hindi and AA only utters gable, so it's largely a relationship based on sign language; still, her presence feels like a liberation and a luxury.

It's not all comforts, though. Rajasthan itself has presented my main dilemma, forcing me to go undercover: in a kind of cerebral "purdah". Purdah itself, of course, no longer exists, but Rajasthan society is still desperately conservative, even insular about its women (when they recently filmed the Indian version of *Popeye* they circumvented auditions for feisty "pop" girl material in Jaipur). My family know about my "status" (and graciously ignore it) but about how I've simply found it easier to lie.

So here I am, an unmarried single mum with sprig, gadding about the state under my multiplying aliases, leaving a trail of increasingly glamorous fictional husbands. One day, I was a sly mistress - "My husband in London, also a silvermist" - it's only a matter of time now before I get caught. I can no longer remember which husband I've created for which person.

And to cap it all, it's the Wedding Season. At night, his awake, slightly glum, to the momentous racket of these optimistic nuptial celebrations. AA next to me, somehow fast asleep, with the occasionally surreal

and self-perplexing fact of my leap here running through my head. It's then that the images of the day gather detachedly in my head: ironic and inconsistent. What am I doing here? What do they really think of me?

I know what the Rani thinks. She is the grand matriclair of my family, and my heroine, a well-known feminist politician who was the first Rajput to come out of purdah to campaign for a seat in Rajasthan's Legislative Assembly; she is also, to my admiration, a mother of six. A great woman then (greater after whisky - she pops up for drinks quite often, talks about the old days of purdah, her fort and 300 servants - always asks how many servants the Queen of England has...)

she is also makes no bones about disapproving of the hours I set for the ayah. I'm effectively rendered gulld-ridden by this until one night when I put the Al! Baba on her lap and I see, slightly astonished, that she doesn't really have a clue how to handle him. Maybe I too, with 300 servants, would attempt to have another five children and embark on a political career.

I know that we must eventually return to good old rip-off Britannia, maybe when the hot weather comes, though I might have to move to Slough to get AA over the culture shock. I've no misgivings yet about our time here, which in fact has been like one long holiday in the most breathless of my pregnancy. I've bought myself a standard of life will never afford in England - and I've even tried to do it. I've given my son an ideal baby universe of bright psychedelic colours and baby-stunning sounds that he can't help but love. I've got one camel and ear-blasting horns they'd be more popular on Vijay Pathi. This Indian adventure isn't over yet.



Sophie James and baby Alexander go shopping, Jaipur-style

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUY AROCH