

THE COOL BOYS' CLUB OF INDIAN PLANE SPOTTERS

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From tarmacs to airport periphery walls, these are India's passionate aviation geeks who chase the coolest planes in the sky

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Rare Air India 747-300M named 'Shivaji' taxiing out for one of its final departures from Mumbai back in 2008

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Antonov Airlines An-225 at Hyderabad



If you were to google 'planespotting', Wikipedia would tell you, it is a hobby of tracking the movement of aircraft, which is often accompanied by photography. That pretty much sums it up. To me, planespotting is nothing more than gazing at a beautiful plane and clicking the odd photograph or two when you notice something rare, beautiful or unusual. It is a mesmerising obsession, popular among "avgeeks" the world over. Back in the day, planespotting used to primarily constitute logging registration numbers of airplanes you spotted in a logbook. With the growth of photography, logbooks slowly started getting replaced by roll film and with the advent of the digital age, as with photography in general, planespotting too went digital. This hobby grew manifold due to websites such as Flickr and especially niche hobbyist sites like *Airliners.net* and *JetPhotos* which brought out enthusiasts from their homes out to the perimeter fences of the world's airports.

I still remember the excitement right after I got my first photo accepted on one of these sites with tough screening standards.

From what was once a small coterie of airplane lovers consisting of at the most three to four individuals, the exposure from airplane photography websites gave a large push to the hobby and slowly the flow of fanmail and requests from people wanting to know where and how to see/photograph airplanes started growing steadily.

INDIAN SPOTTERS

The planespotters of today come from all walks of life. Aviation enthusiast and IT Engineer Dhiren Khatri (22) says, "Until 2014, I wasn't really exposed to aviation, let alone planespotting. I hadn't even flown in an airplane. Then came a couple of aspiring pilots, in my life who, thankfully, introduced me to planespotting. It was love at first sight. And since then, there has been no looking back". Student and planespotter Sanat Gaba (25) recalls, "Some of my oldest memories

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are of spotting Air India and Saudi Arabian 747s taking-off while I played on Juhu beach as a child. I actively started going close to the airport to click planes in late 2009 when I was 16". New Delhi based Angad Singh (27) is a defence journalist who started shooting military jets in 2009 while attending college in Los Angeles, "That spring, I bought a camera as a birthday gift for my sister. Since I wasn't going to reach India until the summer, I took advantage of the few months in hand by taking the airport shuttle to Los Angeles Airport. The next year, a friend took me to an airshow in central California, where I got a taste for photographing military aircraft, and I haven't stopped since". Businessman Arjun Sarup (52) from Mussoorie fondly recalls, "It would have to be in Beirut in the late '60s, as a child. Beirut was a major stop for Air India back then, so meeting the crew regularly at home and slipping out of my mom's grip frequently to look at planes from the airport terrace made me a firm believer."

DRIVEN BY PASSION

During the mid-to-late 2000s, the main driver was in sheer awe and fixation of being near airplanes and seeing new liveries and vintage, primarily Russian aircraft, old Boeings and Airbuses. I was (and still am)

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Japanese Navy's ShinMaywa US-2 alighting on the Pacific Ocean; XH558, the last flying Avro Vulcan, taking off after her last ever appearance at RIAT; Trademark tight formation take-off by the Red Arrows

"Some of my oldest memories are of spotting Air India and Saudi Arabian 747s taking-off while I played on Juhu beach as a child" - Sanat Gaba

extremely fond of the Airbus A340, a four-engined, long-range, commercial jetliner operated by many airlines of the time. My favourite amongst them were the A340s of Virgin Atlantic because of their catchy names like: Plane Sailing, Indian Princess, Miss Behavin, Soul Sister and so on.

Another reason for the A340 love is due to their low, slow and lumbering climb characteristic. I used to attend pilot training ground classes in Juhu Airport which has a long road running the length of the airfield parallel to the flight path of freshly airborne aircrafts. The A340 would literally skim the top of buildings and made for a wonderful sight!

Khatri too shares this sentiment, "Personally, I chase the classic aircraft, especially those which are loud enough to move my head." Angad Singh too has a soft spot for old and unusual aircraft types, "I am more into military aircraft, so I like chasing rare or old military aircraft at airshows, or civil aircraft if they're really 'charismatic' — think old, Russian, or both!" Sanat Gaba has a slightly more pragmatic outlook, "I've noticed over the years that this hobby has



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become less about people's love of aviation and more about fame and popularity on platforms like Instagram especially among the younger crop of millennial planespotters. I do it because of my passion for it. I'm not so interested in new aircraft or liveries that are in the news but those aircrafts that don't get their fair share of appreciation and actually have great stories behind them which mostly happen to be classic aircrafts." Sarup is a little more old school, "I have a penchant for historic military aircraft. Passenger aircraft look virtually identical nowadays; I find them to be rather drab unless there is a beautiful livery"

Bangalore planespotters have worked with the local airport authorities in erecting a planespotting platform outside the airport perimeter wall affording a view of the tarmac. The road leading-up to Hyderabad Airport's departures area also provides a good view of a few aircraft gates and the tarmac; however, Mumbai well and truly is the epicentre of planespotting in India. The late Jimmy Wadia, who has some absolutely priceless photos of Indian aviation from about the 1970s till the mid 2000s did the bulk of his photography at Mumbai Airport. He would buy an INR 100 monthly pass to enter the airport tarmac area for photography, a privilege unheard of after his time. I got my first taste of planespotting back in the early 2000s when my father first took me through the alleys of Kurla near the base of Mumbai's main runway 27 to marvel at the flying machines that I loved so very much. That first dose of airplanes right up close fanned a fascination which has only grown exponentially. A dichotomy of sorts but Dhiren Khatri, Sanat Gaba and I unanimously count the view from the slums of Jari Mari as our favourite spot to admire planes, a sentiment echoed by almost all local and international planespotters who have been there. There are many other places dotting the Mumbai Airport which afford an eyeful of airplanes, such as the terraces of many tall building around the airport periphery, Vakola, the area around Western Express Highway and even Juhu Beach during the winters afterall, the airfield lies bang in the centre of the 4th most populated city on the planet.

Angad Singh who prefers military jets says, "For military aircraft one typically has to attend airshows in India and abroad to



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get one's fix, but I am lucky that my job (defence reporter) often opens doors to dedicated shoots at airbases in India and abroad.”

SECURITY ISSUES

Speaking of New Delhi, while Mumbai may have the best spots, the capital receives unarguably the highest air traffic and best variety of airplanes and airlines across India. For this reason alone the Indira Gandhi International Airport (IGIA) is a magnet for airplane lovers but, arguably the toughest to photograph, given the tight security net around it. I remember getting hauled-up by cops almost daily during my week long planespotting trip there back in 2008. Luckily though, the cops could establish that I wasn't a threat and cautioned me to desist and leave. However, there have been bitter exchanges with others who either weren't sensitive enough in keeping a low profile, may have overstepped the mark or in most cases the cops being completely clueless about people's love for airplanes

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Jet Airways Boeing 777-300ER arriving at New Delhi during the monsoon with a lot of condensation build-up on her wings and some spectacular vortices; Air India ATR-72 airborne from Mumbai; Rada Airlines Ilyushin IL-62MGr — the last flying IL-62 freighter in the world

and perceiving anyone pointing a camera at an airplane with suspicion. Singh adds, “In general one has to be wary of airfield security, police and passers-by who are apt to call in suspicious-looking activity around airports — photography included. I once had a neighbour call the cops on me when spotting from a rooftop in a posh Delhi colony! When spotting civil aircraft from outside an airport, one is typically forced to keep a low profile. Carry a compact bag that doesn't scream “PHOTOGRAPHER”, stow the camera until needed, plan your spotting session to catch the aircraft you are after and leave soon thereafter. It's rather unfortunate, because a community of spotters can serve as an additional set of 'eyes and ears' for the airport & security services and they often do in many countries where aircraft spotting is more widespread.” Khatri feels similarly, “We usually do not spend a lot of time at these spotting locations but plan beforehand so we are there for the shortest amount of time possible. Loitering around an airport is considered suspicious and hence we don't want to get into trouble.”



DHIREN KHATRI



UTKARSH THAKKAR

Passionate airplane enthusiasts don't mind travelling far and wide to see and photograph their favourite airplanes



SANAT GABA

INTERNATIONAL SPOTTING HUBS

Internationally speaking, I remember driving past the aircraft parking ramp of Nice airport in France packed chock-a-block with every possible fancy business jet in the world separated from the public road by just a wire mesh fence! One can photograph away to heart's content without anyone batting an eyelid. Some of the other global batting meccas for planespotting include, Myrtle Avenue in London, Imperial Hill and Sepulveda boulevard in Los Angeles, most airports in Europe, especially the Runway Visitor Park at Manchester, Polderbaan at Amsterdam, Zurich Observation Deck, Founders Plaza in Dallas, Osaka Itami Sky View Park, Viewing Gallery at Tokyo

TOP AND RIGHT: The Indian Navy Tupolev Tu-142 at INS Rajali; An Indian Airforce C-17 Globemaster lifting off into the sunset from Airforce Station, Yelahanka

Haneda and last but not the least: Maho Beach in St. Maarten.

CHASING RARE PLANES

Passionate airplane enthusiasts don't mind travelling far and wide to see and photograph their favourite airplanes. In the summer of 2016, Angad, Sanat and I were privileged to be in attendance at Goa airport to shoot the retirement of Indian Navy's Sea Harrier jump-jets, the same evening Sanat and I left for Hyderabad to photograph the maiden arrival in India of the biggest airplane in the world, The Antonov An-225 'Mriya'. Sanat was fortunate to bring in his 23rd birthday under the wing of the mighty Mriya and being congratulated by his friends and family whilst under the most famous airplane in the world is his most special planespotting moment. A year later, Angad, Arjun, Sanat and I met again in the rural South Indian town of Arakkonam, Tamil Nadu to photograph the retirement

of the Indian Navy's Tupolev Tu-142. Aside from the places mentioned above these planespotterers have photographed at many other locations. Dhiren has also spotted at Hyderabad and Chennai; Sanat has photographed at New Delhi, Bangalore, Goa, Leh, Tokyo, Dubai, Istanbul and Brussels. The list of airports Arjun has spotted at since the 1960s is endless. Angad says, "I've shot military aircraft all over India, from Jodhpur to Cochin, with the Army, Navy and Air Force — to whom I am incredibly grateful for their support. My civil spotting has mostly been limited to Delhi, Dehradun and Mumbai. When abroad, I focus mostly on military aircraft, and have stayed mostly confined to Europe, Russia and the USA."

RARE SIGHTINGS

When it comes to their most prized catches, Arjun replies in an instant, "Well, seeing Concorde land at Delhi in the '80s was



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rare!" As for Angad, "the highlight has probably been standing a few dozen feet away from an MiG-27 conducting an engine ground run at full power, feeling as though my bones were going to be rattled to pieces!" I was lucky to be around for Dhiren's favourite moment, "my most memorable spotting session was when I saw a 48-year old Israel Air Force Boeing 707 tanker here"

As for my favorite moment, one that ranks right up there is the time when I photographed, 'Shivaji' a classic Air India 747-300M tail # VT-EPW taxiing-out for the last time before retirement. I had planned it for days, knowing it was to exit the fleet soon and thereby ending the glorious convention of naming the jumbos after great Indian monarchs — started by JRD Tata himself.

I truly believe we're capturing the rich aviation history of our great land while photographing aircraft in and around India. ■