

# CONTINENTAL DRIFTER: SOLO TRAVELLER

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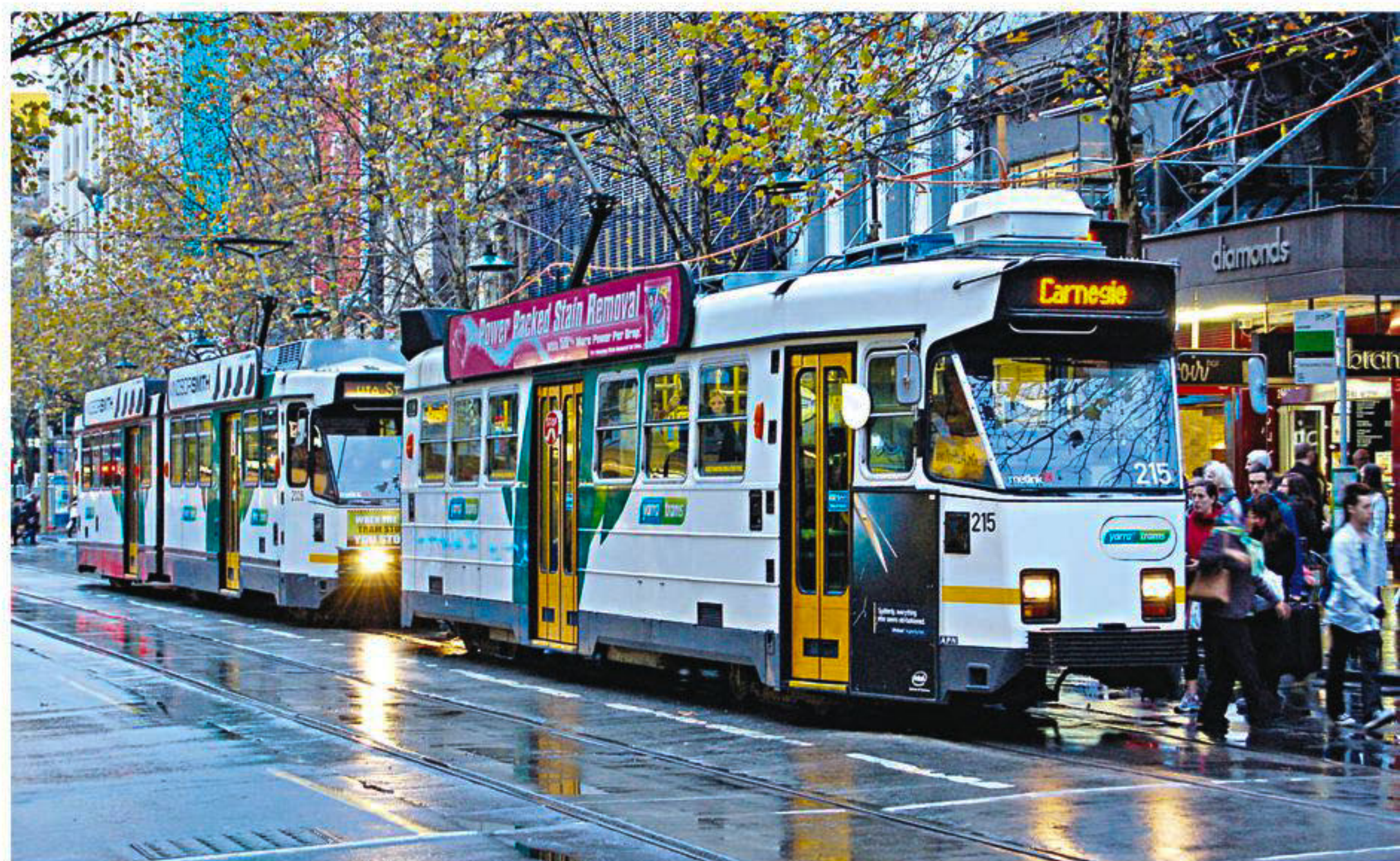
**HOME:**

Today, sitting on my balcony in Dhaka, with my face to the south looking down at the green neighbourhood park, I look back on my travels upon this earth. The tall trees and reddish shrubs and rows of blooming flowers charm my eyes. All rainbow colours merge in the light of the bright afternoon of the Bengali month of Falgun, spring season in this semi-tropical, lower riverine flatland of the Gangetic delta. The rains will come soon, in the month of Boishakh; April 14 will usher in the Bengali new year with a riot of colour and carnivalesque festivity on Pahela Boishakh.

Today, sunlit reflections make me recall how I have lived my life as a diasporic creature, a continental drifter to and from the Indian subcontinent. I have touched the blue waters and the mighty currents of the Indian, Arabian, Atlantic, and the Pacific oceans. The ebb and flow of moonlit waves have alternately swelled and soothed my soul in the years I have spent searching for my journey's end.

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The Indian subcontinent is my geographical space, and I carry my Aryan-Dravidian colour and shape to the Occident and the Orient with pride. Bengal is my birthplace, with my roots firmly attached to the alluvial clay of East Bengal. I am the inheritor of a rich culture layered with trajectories of centuries of settlements by



Persian and Greek and Arab and Portuguese and Dutch and British voyagers, traders, conquerors.

The bloodlines of the Bengali woman meet all cultures and languages, from the Hispanic to the Indic, from the Runic to the Hieroglyphic, from the Nubian to the Sumerian. The profile of the Bengali woman eludes the Cubist frame of Picasso; she is multiethnic, multidimensional, a racial chameleon, made from mud and terra-cotta, from bits and pieces of drifting Gondwanaland and effervescent Gandhara art.

In my travels around the globe, I have met many who have embraced me with their warmth and generosity. Once, at Heathrow, a beautiful, tall hijab-adorned lady, upon spotting me in the milieu in my long coat and trousers, suddenly came running up to me with a radiant smile and said, "La Arabia?" I smiled back and softly replied, "No, Bangladeshi."

The light in our eyes and our smiles

lingered in the air for a while, and then melted as we each turned towards our own boarding gates. I am fluent in four languages and can get by with a smattering of known words and phrases in a few more Romance tongues, but at that singular moment in time at Heathrow, I wished I had cultivated the art of conversational Arabic even though I can read the Quran and Arabic script.

My multi-ethnicity is not a mystery or cause for befuddlement for me. Rather, I am amused at the comedy of errors my Bangladeshi sisters and I end up re-enacting on the world's stage. We all have anecdotes we love to share. In Canada, all the way from Nova Scotia to Ontario, with me in my long skirts and my long black hair, black-lined eyes and pale brown face, strangers kept asking me, "Are you Mexican?"

Ironically, here in Dhaka too, I am often quizzed. Recently, lunching with an academic of the opposite gender at a conference in Hotel Sheraton, in my starched sari and matching crystal dangling earrings, chatting gaily in rapid-fire English, the chief waitress handed me the goblet of chilled fruit juice, smiled, hesitated, and shyly asked, "Are you, madam, perhaps Sri Lankan?"

**SECOND HOME:**

Mornings in Melbourne are magical. The large picture window of my bedroom faces east. I wake up with the shrill whistling of songbirds, with the red-blue hue of dawn filtering in through the open slats of the Venetian blind. I look out at the green rolling hills, and trees as far as the eye can see. The new babe, my grandson, sleeps in his cot in his parents' room, with the window on the west facing the small rectangular landscaped garden at the front. The sun's slanted rays keep his room snug and warm in the late afternoon when the breeze crosses the ocean and cools the earth.

The city centre lies to the south. Standing on my toes on the freshly mowed grass in the large back lawn, I can look beyond the wooden fence and see the faint outline of the skyline of the business district. On clear, starry nights, the city lights sparkle, and the din of bustling activity is carried intermittently through the ether all the way to this quiet northern suburb of



PHOTOS: COURTESY