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

WORDS VISHAL JOLAPARA
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 Gala (25) recalls, ‘Some of my oldest memories
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

“I was (and still am) and vintage, primarily Russian aircraft, being near airplanes and seeing new liveries. I was in sheer awe and mom’s grip frequently to look at planes from home and slipping out of my parallel to the flight path of freshly airborne aircrafts. The A340 would literally skim the top of buildings and made for a wonderful sight!”

Growing up in Mumbai, the air was filled with planes. The epicentre was the Mumbai Airport, which a lot of planes came from, and I think that’s why I’m passionate about it. For many of us, spotting was like a superpower, a way to connect with something that we all admired. It was like being in a league of our own, where we could be around airplanes without being part of the crew.

Businessman Arjun Sarup, who started shooting military jets in 2009 while attending college, says, “For me, it’s all about the thrill of being close to the action. I’ve taken my share of risks, but it’s been worth it. I’ve chased everything from the Red Arrows to the Phantom FGR.4, and I’ve even flown with the Royal Air Force’s Typhoon. It’s a passion that’s always been with me, and I’m not sure I could ever give it up.”

When it comes to the future of planespotting, there are those who think it’s a dying art. But for Sarup, it’s far from that. “People are passionate about aviation, and they always will be. The technology may change, but the spirit of aviation will never die out. So, let’s keep spotting!”
get one’s fix, but I am lucky that my job (defence reporter) 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 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.”

New Delhi receives unarguably the highest air traffic and best variety of airplanes and airlines across India.
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 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 planespotters 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 aircrafft 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 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 IAF 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.