

From Madras to Malabar - South India April 2009

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The guide books all said the same thing – the best time to visit is January to March. Avoid the hot season April to July, or Monsoon August to November. School holidays however dictate either April or August. Our previous visit to India, 9 years ago took in Rajasthan and Ladakh, but the South could be in a different country - more laid back and friendly, less hassly, safer, and fewer persistent salespeople or beggars.

India covers such a range of cultures, languages and physiques that we were constantly wondering what holds the country together. We were there during the election, involving 760 million people voting in 1.2 million polling booths, electronically, with one finger marked with indelible ink to prevent fraud. Kerala, which has voted communist since the 50s, had a 70% turnout and a close race between the communist coalition NDF and the congress coalition UDF. Posters of the candidates were everywhere. The style is the same for both parties, the smiling and reassuring candidate looking straight to camera. Sarah managed to unravel the logos of the different parties, and copied each one in her sketch book. Throughout the holiday, as she usually does, she kept a visual diary of impressions. In most places posters of rival candidates hung side by side, with little of the defacing or vandalism you might expect in Britain. It was strange to see the Hammer and Sickle everywhere – but India does not have an inheritance tax, and the highest income tax in any state is 20%. Kerala's reputation for a stropy and unionised workforce is probably completely undeserved – the strong sense of pride in what people do evident everywhere.

A second unifying factor is a common history of British rule, in some places longer than others (Pondicherry is still very French, and I had a fine *coq au vin* there). Everywhere we went people spoke with respect for the English for the construction of railways, dams, hydroelectric schemes, tunnels and pipes, elements of a superstructure which has lasted. My mention of my father's birth in India, and my grandfather's work as a judge in Lahore, went down well. My great grandfather Reginald's part in the suppression of the Mutiny was less well received.

Thirdly there is cricket, the 'great Indian game accidentally discovered by the English'. Everywhere, on play grounds, car parks, beaches, there were several games going on at 7am, young men seriously working on their game, taking exercise and working out before the weather got hot. How different from London kids. We seldom saw young women in recreation though. Very few South Indians smoke.

Fourthly, 80% of the population is Hindu. In Tamil Nadhu we visited a number of ancient temples, and we tried to come to grips with the essentials. While the philosophy dates back to the Vedic texts, for the common follower, the mythology of epic hero-Gods appear to be the basis of worship. The stories of the trilogy of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Shiva the Destroyer, and their consorts, are taught to every child from an early age, and their complexity and bizarreness goes well beyond Greek epic myths. The stories do not necessarily have a moral conclusion, but rather represent different idealised aspects of ordinary mortals. There is no doubting the devotion showed

in worship, but many describe Hinduism as a culture, rather than a religion. Certainly it is the only religion that doesn't claim any exclusive truth. Cultural diversity and tolerance is at the heart of Hinduism, notwithstanding the aberration of extremist nationalism of Hindutva. These anti-Muslim zealots surface at election time, with one of Indira Gandhi's grandsons being jailed for inciting racial hatred but being allowed to stand for parliament; and Gujarat's Chief Minister Modi, closely associated with the massacre of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, is a contender for Prime Minister.

Tamil Nadhu

Our twenty-four day tour started in the southern state of Tamil Nadhu, with its own language and script. Although not far from Sri Lanka, we did not come across much support for the LTTE Tamil Tigers, despite the harsh actions of the Sri Lankan government at the time. Certainly the Hindu daily newspaper was very unsympathetic to them.

We flew into Chennai and stayed in **Mammalapuram** for two nights – a wonderful shore temple, over a thousand years old, built next to a shore, a beach with fishing boats drawn up and the associated net repair work to watch; and several outstanding carvings on rockfaces and caves, and the five Rathas, a group of mini-temples in different styles. The town is still famous for its stone carving, and the main road is lined with sculpture workshops, exquisite work with fine detail, mostly of the epic gods.

An outing to Vedantangul bird sanctuary was astonishing. An inland swamp with trees covered with wading and fishing birds - painted storks, pelicans, velvet ibis, egrets. Here our little binoculars proved very popular with other families, and we made many friends passing them round large families who all wanted to have a look. I hoped my alcohol based lens cleaner was good against conjunctivitis.

Pondicherry was a break from temples into French colonial architecture and rather smart French families from Chennai weekendng, or visiting Auroville. This ideal community, set up by Aurobindh and his disciple 'the Mother', has become a tourist attraction, much to the pioneering families' annoyance, and in turn the day trippers get an impression of rudeness from them. We bought some handmade paper from the Aurobindh factory, which has fallen out with the community of Auroville over its exclusiveness and purely European composition.

We took in four more temple towns, Gangaikondacholapuram, Darasuram, Thanjavur and Madurai. The first, quite out of the way, was perhaps the most beautiful with exquisite carvings, unpainted, with scenes from Shiva's life set in stone on a Vimana tower. Few pilgrims made it here except during festivals. Removing shoes on entry to these temples was extremely painful, as the rock got very hot. It was only at **Thanjavur** that we discovered that we could wear socks, and so walking quickly across sunlit stretches became less of a trial.

Many of the stories depicted in the carvings were of Shiva getting the better of Vishnu. Only at Madurai did Vishnu worship appear, in a minor temple. Kerala, on the other hand appeared mostly Vishnavite, with his incarnations Rama and Krishna more in evidence. Meenakshi, Vishnu's sister, became Shiva's wife.

Madurai is an important pilgrimage town, with its temple to Meenakshi a perpetual succession of festivals - we were there for Yagasala, a preparation for Kumbabhishekam, where 600,000 people

were expected. The temple is the most impressive but also the least aesthetically pleasing, at least to our eyes. Here the four main Gopuras, gateway towers, are covered with intricate statues and these had just been repainted – on one of them they were dismantling the makeshift scaffolding, irregular poles lashed together with raffia. The statues here were visibly plumper, their voluptuousness accentuated with the cartoon-like painting in bright colours which emphasised bellies, pecs and boobs.

Women come to pray for fertility from Meenakshi, and offerings were handed in to the temple officials. Many of these were handsome young Brahmins, and Sarah was very taken by them. Different priests representing different Gods were accepting offerings for burning, and during slack times, spent their time chatting on their mobiles! The pall of smoke could be seen from our hotel. People whisper prayers in the ear of the statues of the sacred cow, Nandhi, and poured turmeric and oil on his head. To add to the feeling of disorientation, a band of drummers and twin reeded instruments played loudly and continuously, relayed by a very effective PA system throughout the temple and surrounding streets. Trying to compare the scene with extreme Christian rituals – Seville in holy week, Lourdes candlelight processions, crucifixion enactments in Mexico and elsewhere, tales of statues with magical powers, holy relics and parts of the true cross – failed to bring many reassuring parallels. Elsewhere in a temple in Varkala we saw what looked like Barbie dolls hanging from a holy tree, with people praying devoutly to them, which looked strange to our rationalist eyes, as did the plethora of Shiva-lingams at Darasuram.

The Western Ghats

Periyar Tiger Sanctuary would not pass the trades description act, but an extensive wildlife sanctuary with a man-made lake, resulting from a British 19th century dam, has a great deal of wildlife, especially birds. The boats on the lake, crammed with excited Indian families, are not ideal for wildlife watching, but we saw elephants (including a calf) bison, sambar deer, and lots of cormorants and kingfishers on the dead tree stumps. We booked an all day jeep safari, and we were picked up at our hotel at 5.30 am. We didn't expect our expedition to turn into a convoy of 12 jeeps, revving up and down a road trying to chase an evanescent herd of elephants. Finally we spotted a tusker, honour was served, and we continued to a very pleasant guided trek in the jungle. Access to the whole reserve is controlled, a substantial entry fee for Europeans, and only guided walks are allowed. On the positive side, all the guides are from the local tribal people, poachers turned gamekeepers, and they were quite knowledgeable and enthusiastic.

A tour of several villages in an ox-drawn cart offered a very sedate insight into village life and tropical agriculture, as well as a chance to brush up on our German. Many Bavarians come to South India for Ayurvedic cures, mostly lasting a month or more, involving detoxification and herbal remedies taken through the skin during massages. Migraines, sleep problems and skin complaints were the ailments in which the highest success was claimed.

The local town is also famous for its spices, and we visited a spice garden which samples all the local plants which are farmed, especially cardamom and tapioca. Our hotel, Wildernest, was low key with a very friendly staff, high rooms and a plethora of monkeys which invaded our balcony every morning in their frenetic and curious way. Rollins gave us an insight into the local religions. There are

four Christian churches in the small village of Thekkady, Roman Catholic, 'Latin' Catholic (ie Lourdes), Syrian Orthodox and Pentecostal. All the businesses and guides he recommended were from his RC church naturally.

Munnar, at a higher altitude, had much more dramatic scenery, impressive hills flanked with tea plantations. This gives a vivid green textured aspect to the countryside which sets off the contours in a slightly surreal way. A guided walk to the top of Mount Lakshmi was certainly the highlight of this section, with the guide full of experience and knowledge – he had taken a party of London psychiatrists for a five day trek the previous week.

Kerala Coast

Kerala has its own language and script, different from Tamil but with the same Dravidian roots. If a Tamil wishes to talk to a Keralan, English is the lingua franca. The towns we saw in Kerala were markedly cleaner than Tamil Nadu, with much less plastic litter; more recycling takes place here. But concern for the environment is not a strong priority for most.

On the Kerala coast we visited three towns, Cochin, Alleppey and Varkala. **Cochin** was distinctly sweltering when we arrived, but late afternoon rainstorms cleared the humidity for pleasant evenings. Camilla and Alice had recommended a home stay here, and Asha and Sunny Abrahams at the Chiramel Residency were a pleasant relief from the bland sycophancy of more expensive hotels, and we learnt much about the election and life in Cochin. We liked Cochin.

The hotel was next to a large parade ground, completely full of cricketers and football games from 7am. We felt that delinquency, drunkenness, drugs and adolescent angst is entirely alien to the young Keralan male. But where are the girls?

The highlight of our stay was eating fish curry in coconut sauce, wrapped in a banana leaf, on the Fort house waterfront, under a coconut tree, watching fishermen, dolphins, fishing and cargo boats go by. We went to two classical concerts at the Kathakali centre, one of sitar, the other of singing, both with the same fabulous tabla player. Sadly only Europeans were in the audience; the centre puts on a different concert every night of the year, and impressive record despite small ticket sales.

A visit to Ernakulum, the commercial hub, took in the huge sari emporium, Jayalakshmi, where extended families chose the wedding saris of their brides – a very lively scene. The Jewish area and spice alleys of Cochin were fragrant with cardamom, pepper and cinnamon, but sadly the synagogue was shut for the duration.

After Cochin we spent 24 hours on a rice boat on the **backwaters**. Somewhat of a tourist trap, but a fascinating insight into a river water world. We had a rice boat to ourselves, with a crew of two, who cooked us wonderful food, including some tiger prawns we bought off a fisherman in a canoe. Unfortunately they had little English between them. We chugged gently across Broads, main thoroughfares, smaller side canals and glimpses into yet smaller streams. The river serves for cooking water, washing up, washing clothes (vigorously beating them against a rock) bathing, brushing teeth, and of course transport. Most people live on narrow strips of land between the river and the rice fields behind, which can be flooded after planting and then pumped out for harvesting.

Small sago plantations and a goat or two supplemented their fish diet. We had a very relaxing day watching paddy birds, kingfishers, small cormorants and weaver birds, and all of life going by.

Further down the coast, **Varkala** is a beach resort relatively untouched by package holiday hotels; a cliff full of fish restaurants overlooking a beach; at one end, Europeans bathing under the watchful eyes of whistle-blowing beach guards, ensuring nobody got out of their depths or strayed outside a narrow strip; at the other end Indian families standing or sitting in the waves, part of the pilgrimage to the local temple. The New year, and a festival to Krishna, resulted in loud and resounding fireworks from 2am to the afternoon.

A delightful walk North along the coast took us past fishermen's communities, long boats being prepared for the night's fishing. From our restaurant on the cliff I counted 40 boats out at sea, presumably fishing all night. The traditional coir nets and wooden boat caulked with coconut fibre cannot have changed much in hundreds of years.

Half an hour away from Varkala is the Golden Island, involving an hour's punt along another backwater river. The coconut groves here are the centre of the coir industry, with families processing the hulls into loose fibres to be woven into ropes and matting.

Most of the Europeans at Varkala were young free spirits, stopping off between Goa and Kathmandu; others were on package holidays from Trivandrum. All the shops on the cliff front were Kashmiri, and the restaurants served a mixture of Thai, Chinese, Mexican, Spanish, Nepalese and Cuban cuisine. We fled after three days feeling a little old.

Our hotel in **Alleppey**, the Raheem Residency, came highly recommended by Adam and Carola. A British 'bungalow' in the original meaning of the term had been extensively renovated as a very classy hotel. Our room was a 5m cube with a bed that required a step to climb into it. The veranda by the swimming pool was ideal to sip gin and tonic sundowners, while the raised restaurant got enough breeze to cool off. It was certainly our best accommodation. The nearby beach was a popular evening gathering place for families, and ladies in saris, nuns, granddads with walking sticks and young boys with kites all contrived to get wet and hold hands in the waves. I asked several people, but no one could swim. A very friendly and happy scene.

India appears to be riding the recession better than most, and while we talk about China overtaking the US economy by 2030, India has several world class companies – Tata and Corus for example – which continue to grow during the downturn. If India could control its population and move away from family wealth acquisition to a social and environmental awareness, then it would be the greatest country in the world.

We finished our holiday in Delhi, meeting Sam and Mike at Laura's flat and having a stunning meal out with them.

We were greatly helped in our planning of the holiday by Adam and Carola, Alice, Camilla, Danny and John, and Tim and Charlotte – thank you all.

An album of our photographs may be seen on www.wilbo.org/india.