

## INDIA – LOOK BEYOND THE LITTER!

....if you do, you will find a place of great sights, sounds and unsophisticated charm!

When it was suggested that I should visit India, I showed reluctant interest! The part of me that is always seeking new and exciting destinations to market and share with clients was telling me that I must go. The conservative side of me kept referring back to stories told in the past about the poverty, the smells, Delhi Belly and the likes! Well, I went and now I can't wait to return!

My experience took me touring in the south of India – with a sobering few days in Mumbai to balance the experience. Travel wise Anne Rogers had said – “you can't go to India without a big city experience” and she was right. What I have since learnt is that you cannot generalise when it comes to discussing India as the country and the huge population that it hosts, varies greatly from state to state. Please read on if you would like to share my impressions of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Arrival in to Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu, formerly known as Madras, quickly set the scene that is India, despite the fact that we hit the street at 1.00 am. We walked for miles through a very clean but roughly constructed airport terminal (later discovered the same style of concreting throughout!), stood in long lines for immigration and then had to pass through an x-ray security screening before we could enter the baggage collection area – an immediate point of difference!

Outside there were people everywhere (of course!). We boarded our very comfortable air conditioned mini coach which actually transported us all the way to Cochin over the next week. Had our delightful driver Bo Bo (from here on known as Mr. Smiley) decorated it especially for our arrival? No, the many floral garlands and art works were in fact a result of the festival that celebrates vehicles! We soon learn that you are never far from a celebration of some kind.

After a good sleep (6 hours at a very nice Trident airport hotel) our holiday (?) began! There was no time to explore Chennai but I believe that it offers “an eclectic mix of sandy beaches, heritage buildings and is a modern, vibrant centre for commerce and industry”. I will always remember it as the place where you are immediately confronted by the garbage – but in no time at all the scenes of people going about their daily lives takes over!

Our very experienced guide Dileesh, soon explained that touring in the south is not about visiting grand buildings and the likes but instead about experiencing everyday life in the region. If you see something of interest along the way, you stop, discuss and if appropriate have a go! This we did as we travelled to the coastal town of Pondicherry, sometimes referred to as the Indian Cote d'Azur. Tree-lined boulevards, yellow washed walls and grand buildings left by the French make this an attractive coastal town where you can bike ride or stroll.

Roadside experiences that we shared included humble manufacturing operations making coir rope from coconut husks, clay pots, ceramic tiles and bricks. Silk waxing and weaving, rice and vegetable planting and harvesting, the drying of grains such as rice and corn on the highway (yes on the hot paved road!) the herding of sheep and goats plus many more agricultural activities. A weekly oxen market where the loading (or could that be overloading) of trucks was an operation that amazed!

Our next overnight stop was in the sleepy town of Chettinad, the cultural home of the Chettiers, a community that dates back to the Cholas and made its fortune as money lenders, merchants and jewelry dealers. Today the streets are lined with the relics of the palaces built with the profits; around 120 of them. Most are just caretaker occupied but we stayed in one which has been converted in to an outstanding boutique hotel. It's a great place to wander the streets.

Moving on, our roadside interactions continued. We stopped and talked to a group of barefooted pilgrims, all clad in yellow and with only 75 kms to walk before reaching their sacred temple. School children offered to share their treats in return for seeing their pictures on our camera screens. We gave way to mopeds regularly carrying 10 passengers or more and lopsided buses, leaning as a result of the passengers who have hung on the outside over many years! Moving haystacks, ox carts, push bikes and pedestrians add to the mass that moves in amazing harmony due to the constant beeping. Horns are used to advise your location, rarely out of aggression.

Along the way we passed many places of worship (Christian, Hindu & Buddhist) but we saved our temple time until Madurai where we visited the 2000 year-old temple complex which is literally a city within the city. It is one of the oldest and largest of its kind in India. Our Taj hotel was located in parkland, high on a hill overlooking the city. The view was dominated by the temple and houses painted in all the colours of the rainbow, as is the Hindu way.

People – everywhere! I was amazed to find that in the south, adults predominantly wear the traditional dress – the sari for women and the dhoti for men. I had fun being dressed in the 9 metres of silk that became my sari but I certainly don't wish to work in the paddy fields or ride side saddle on a motor bike in one, as the women so graciously do. They remain cheerful through thick and thin – so many have so little but they appear healthy and happy. Our long days on the road were enhanced by the constant smiles, waves and acknowledgement of the people we passed and photographed, with permission granted almost unanimously.

A different experience awaited us as we climbed from the fertile plains in to the mountains and across the border in to Kerela. Cool Thekkady is the location of the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary, home to elephants, rarely sighted tigers and many other animals. It is also the heart of the spice gardens and trade. Plantations of white oaks, with pepper vines twisting their way to the top, under planted with row upon row of tea, coffee and herbs creates some of the most spectacular scenery that I have seen! Add the sari clad pickers carrying baskets on their heads and it's simply magic! Where ever you are in India, be sure to have plenty of battery life in your camera.

Food, glorious food! There is just no doubt that food was a tour highlight! We watched it being prepared in humble restaurants and roadside stalls, we took cooking lessons, dined in delightful restaurants and we ate and ate! I found the food more aromatic than "hot". In many instances the heat is added through the addition of chutneys and sauces. There is a focus on vegetarian dishes and of course a wonderful array of freshly baked breads. I never did master the art of eating local style, that's eating with your hands so that you can mix the foods to enhance the flavours! Yes, we did eat street food, every bit delicious, yes we did drink sweet milk coffee from vendors who flip the coffee from jug to jug, forming long coffee streams to froth up the brew! Of course we consumed lots of Kingfisher beers just because it was hot. No, none of us became sick, partly due to the fact

that our wonderful guide issued us with hand sanitizer, regularly throughout the day. Dileesh claims that 10 years ago, everyone got sick but not today!

Most mornings, yoga was offered. Sadly most of our relaxation and meditation time was spent on the coach but this was always enjoyable. I loved every minute of the journey as there was always something to see, something happening. In Alleppey (we had left the mountains and dropped to an area below sea level!) we did relax. We boarded a kettuvallam, a traditional rice barge converted in to a houseboat, then spent the afternoon observing backwater life. I would recommend an overnight stay on board. We continued to relax as we spent time at Marari Beach resort located on the Arabian sea. Treatments in the Ayurvedic Spa centre were a treat as was the old fashioned tea/coffee cart that arrived by the pool each afternoon.

Our final southern experience was to explore Cochin. The fort of Kochi has been in the hands of the Dutch, British, Portuguese and Chinese in the past and each left some influence that can be seen today. Vasco da Gama died here in 1524, on his third visit to India (see, even then people wanted to return to India!) He was buried in the still standing St. Francis church before being shipped out to Lisbon 14 years later. Lots of history and lovely shops to explore.

We mostly stayed in hotels owned and operated by the “cgh earth experience” group – clean, green hospitality. ([www.cghearth.com](http://www.cghearth.com)) Old homes and palaces have been converted in to small boutique hotels in some places and these offer intimate experiences in central locations. Alternatively, we found cottage villages created in magnificent grounds where organic gardens, butterfly gardens, work farms feature. They have a team of Botanists on staff to guide your experience. Outstanding hospitality, service and meals and a wide range of inclusive activities are just a bonus.

And then there was Mumbai! Go Air delivered us safely and on time from Cochin to Mumbai in a spotless “young” aircraft. Our awaiting guide proudly announced that they are always on time, unlike Air India! We drove by the famous Taj Mumbai Hotel (we returned the next day for a magnificent High Tea) before arriving at our funky boutique hotel, just around the corner and located on the first floor of an office building ([abodeboutiquehotels.com](http://abodeboutiquehotels.com)). It just opened in January – I felt like I was in a loft hotel in New York. The lobby/reception/shop/dining room was like a living room in a private home. After initial reservations, we loved it!

Like the hotel, the city grew on us. With “Mr Lucky” our driver and a guide, we toured (it was Sunday so there was less traffic – be aware that 22 million registered people live in the city and who knows how many others!), passing all the beautiful old buildings such as the University, the Courts and the Victoria Terminus railways station, all a legacy from the British. The Dhobi ghat (washermans colony) and Mani Bhaven, Gandhi’s house in Mumbai which is now a museum, were all included. I loved our visit to the flower market and to a 4 level clothing store where we watched the selling staff toss/display magnificent sari fabrics before future brides who were selecting their wedding outfits. Clouds of colour and bling!

Some beggars are on the streets as are many families who simply live there. Amazingly, they are clean, organized and healthy looking. As our guide said, they manage. Many would have employment doing domestic duties in the nearby apartments, they live close to their work. I will

never forget seeing a mother brushing her little girl's beautiful hair, the happy baby lying on a cloth on the footpath whilst the little brother entertained himself playing cards.

A visit to Mumbai would not be complete without seeing the dabbawala network. This is a system where hot food in lunch boxes (layered Tiffin boxes) is collected from the residences of workers and some commercial kitchens in the late morning and delivered to the workplace, generally by train and bicycle. Empty boxes are returned in the afternoon. It's an amazing operation with an estimated 250,000 lunches being delivered each work day.

After a fabulous street food picnic in our car (Mr Lucky ran from stall to stall returning with the finest local offerings but not before purchasing Kingfisher beers to wash it down with!) we had our most sobering experience – a visit to Dharavi, known as the “largest slum in Asia”. A delightful young man who lived here for 7 years before moving to a similar settlement on the other side, where his dad found work, took us there by train. For two hours we walked throughout, visiting recycling factories, the pottery colony, residential spaces...all the time we marveled at the sense of purpose and community here not to mention the complete lack of any occupational health and safety considerations. Once again we found healthy happy people coping with their lot in life! Our guide is now doing a Masters Degree in Business studies at Mumbai University, a fine young man with a great respect for his heritage.

After the slums, the beautiful 4 month old International Airport was a pristine contrast. A fabulous airport and no sign of the rough and ready concrete that greeted us just 10 days prior in Chennai! Things are changing in India!

***Maree McClelland visited India as a guest of India Unbound – October, 2014***