

2004-2005 SOUTH INDIA

Wednesday, December 22-thru Friday December 24. After I heard that Charity and Evans were going to be in India for Christmas, I decided that this would be a great opportunity to see southern India and Sri Lanka, both of which have eluded me in my three previous trips. Accordingly we decided to meet in Bombay/Mumbai for Christmas and travel south to Cochin and Kerala. I invited Scotti and Mac to come, so with Peter and Constance, Charity and Evans' children, and Kandis Scott, Charity's stepmother, we are a group of eight.

I dreaded the trip to get there. Everyone and their uncle are traveling at this time of the year and the airports were seething masses of humanity. Fortunately, with wheelchairs at every step, the trip was made effortless. It is eight hours overnight to Paris. Then a three-hour layover before another eight hours to Mumbai. I even slept during the layover-sitting upright in a chair in the Business Class Lounge! The India flight was full of college students going home for the holidays. My seatmate was a sophomore at the Wharton School headed home to Goa. We had very little conversation as we both slept most of the way. With the help of no-jet-lag pills I arrived at 12:30 AM, December 24, feeling much better than I expected. General Tours representative, Anthony, of Creative Travel, met me and took me to the Hilton Towers, about an hour from the airport.

Finally I was presented with a complete itinerary including dates. I now understood why the change had been to have us truncate the stay in Sri Lanka. We weren't to leave Bombay until the 27th! They had scheduled all day tours on Christmas and nothing on the 26th. When I tried to change this to a half-day tour each day I was told the arrangements were set and I could not change. Even though the itinerary told me my tour stated at 9:30 AM on Christmas, I was told I would be picked up at 8:15 AM

My Hilton Honors membership qualified me for an upgraded room on the 23rd floor with a sweeping view of the Arabian Sea and Mumbai's skyscrapers. I was last in Bombay in 1965 when Mother and I made our round the world tour. On that trip we told our travel agent not to use Hilton or other American style hotels in favor of hotels, which gave a regional flavor. As anyone who has read my round-the-world journal has learned, by the time we reached Bombay we were more than ready for a good old American Hilton! This one is lovely, with a huge Christmas tree in the lobby and every amenity for our stay.

I woke at 7:30 and feel pretty good. Have no plans for the day except to get some money changed and have a massage. No one else has arrived. Scotti and Mac had mechanical problems with their plane and aren't even due until about now, some 12 hours behind schedule.

Mumbai was originally a dumbbell shaped island tapering at the center to a narrow neck. Reclamation turned seven islands into a long peninsula leading out to the Arabian Sea. The Hilton is near the end of the island.

The original name, Mumbai, came from the influence of the goddess Mombadevi. The Portuguese settlers renamed it Bom Bahia or good bay, and its harbor sheltered their merchant ships and men-of-war. The British called it Bombay and developed it to provide trade links with India. After India became independent the name was changed back to Mumbai. Thus Mumbai is not a typical Indian city, but a modern international metropolis.

I went out on the street to try and find an ATM but was unsuccessful and ended up changing \$50 at the hotel desk for what was not the best rate at 43/1. I don't want to carry many rupees for I intend to use credit cards.

My massage was not ayurvedic but used ayurvedic oils - lots of them. I felt like a greased pig at the end. The massage therapist then ushered me into a steam room in an attempt to cook me but I could only take a couple of minutes. Then I went to bed for a nap.

Three hours later I woke and decided to go down for a meal. None of my children had arrived but I went to the Frangipani dining room, which is the hotel's Italian Restaurant, and was just starting on my risotto and seafood when Kandis arrived. She invited me to join her and the two of us split a bottle of pinot grigio and caught up on what we had been doing since last we met at Peter's graduation.

Finally Scotti and Mac arrived after a journey from Hell. They were 40 hours coming from Denver on an Air India flight with one calamity after another! This must set a record of some sort. I heard later that Peter was stranded at the airport when General Tours did not pick him up. Evans and Charity had still not arrived when I went to bed.

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Saturday, December 25. I woke up at 7:00 and went down for breakfast in the lobby bar. Mac soon joined me and said he and Scotti had slept well and were ready to go. Scotti had gone to the Frangipani and was having the buffet breakfast with Kandis. There was no sign of the Harrell's.

Our lovely guide arrived at 8:15. She is a beautiful 24-year old Indian girl named Vaibhabai meaning prosperity. "Call me Vicky", she told us. She was wearing a lovely native costume. It was a long tunic garment called a Kameez and pants called Salwar/Churidar.

Peter was next to arrive. He had gotten in about ten the night before on another delayed Air India Flight. Kandis went and roused Evans and Charity who had arrived even later. They also had not been met and were just starting to get up. No one is pleased with General Tours.

However, Creative Travel seems to have matters under control. They provided us with a 40-passenger luxurious bus, labeled "Cozy Travel" to take us to the dock. Vicky told us how pleased she was to be our escort. She usually gets big tour groups or couples. She had never seen an American family traveling together before although Indians travel in family groups all the time.

Our goal was Elephanta Island and it's famous eighth century cave shrines to Shiva. We boarded at the dock just below the "Gateway to India" a magnificent triumphal arch commemorating the arrival of King George V and Queen Mary in 1911. We were packed onto the boat for the hour-long journey to the island. "No photographie" proclaimed a sign to prohibit us taking pictures of the Indian Navy and the huge oil refinery operation.

At the island, we found ourselves at the end of a long causeway, but there was an antique "toy" train to take us to the 120 steps that lead up to the caves. I didn't remember the train from my trip 40 years ago, but I did recall the trip up the steps, for our guide had hired bearers with sedan chairs to carry us up. At the time I was embarrassed, but 40 years later with leg cramps and breathing problems it seemed like the right thing to do. If I ever do this again however, I will find four bearers the same size. These were of different sizes and the chair had a pronounced list to the left. It is not the most comfortable form of transportation but the rest of the group had fun taking pictures of the old lady being carried to the top. Both sides of the stairs are lined with tourist goods, and vendors to entice you to buy.

The caves themselves are very interesting. They were cut into the rock, and while impressive pillars seem to support the roof, they are really not necessary at all for the cantilevered effect of the roof bears its own weight.

The shrine is dedicated to Shiva. Huge carvings in the cave depict various aspects of the god. One of the more famous carvings is a serene, almost Buddha-like three-faced figure portraying the god as the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer, the Hindu trinity. Another carving shows his marriage. I have never really understood the three or four thousand gods in Hindu mythology but Vicky explained you need one for everything you do. It is unfortunate that the statues were badly damaged during the Portuguese occupation when they were used for target practice.

My bearers had waited patiently and the trip down hill was easier with me facing backward so I could not fall out. They told me I was very heavy and they would need more than the 300-rupee fee. I was prepared to tip liberally but they said they preferred dollars and I ended up giving them \$12 which was much too much, but it helped to assuage my conscience at making them work so hard. It is so hard to visualize an economy where a dollar goes a long way to buy things on the black market and the living standard finds people living on the equivalent of \$200 a year.

We took the train back to the boat and soon were back at the Gateway of India.

Vicky arranged that we could have the afternoon tour on the 26th, so we were free to enjoy the Christmas buffet in the elegant Taj Mahal Hotel. They had everything from turkey and a suckling pig to vegetarian entrees like a "pasta turkey".

The free wine left something to be desired. I didn't have the heart to try the "mulled" wine, so I ordered a bottle of Pinot Grigio, although the waiter took a bit of convincing that I did know it was extra cost. Our bus returned at 3:00 to take us back to the Hilton.

Scotti came up to my room and presented me with a picture of a beautiful quilt she had made me for a Christmas present. It will be waiting for me in Atlanta on my return. Then the others came up to admire my view.

About 6:00 Kandis called to invite me to have a drink. We went to the adjoining Oberoi Hotel since the bar at the Hilton was not very comfortable.

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I really wasn't hungry enough to have anything more to eat, but Evans invited me to their room to try and telephone my two missing children who are just getting started on Christmas since they are eleven and a half hours behind us. We tried but the circuits were busy and we could not get through.

Scotti and Mac had crashed for some much need sleep but the rest of us went down to the Frangipani for supper. I had a delicious tomato soup. It has been such a nice Christmas!

Sunday, December 26. Had a leisurely morning catching up on my e-mail and reading. Then Scotti and Mac called and asked if I wanted to go to the bazaar with them. We climbed into a teeny little cab for the short ride. Scotti found a lovely blue bed cover with elephants on it at one stand. Then we found a real store with all the Indian goods on display. I found a small box of Agra marble decorated with lapis lazuli. It had Charity's name written all over it so I bought it for her. She had not been able to buy this souvenir when she went to Agra earlier in the week.

Vicky picked us up for the afternoon tour with a smaller bus; probably it would hold only 30 passengers! Our first stop was at the 100 year old Jain Temple where a pre-wedding ceremony was going on. We had to take our shoes off so leather soles would not defile the temple. The temple itself was white marble with colored decorations of statuary and murals. The ceiling was decorated with representations of the nine planets. Gifts of fruit wrapped in silver were being presented and drawings were being made on the floor using seeds. There was much chanting going on. The ceremony probably lasts for two hours or more and the wedding follows in two or three days.

The Jains are an ancient cult based on Zoroasterism. They are vegetarians and also eat nothing grown under the ground, such as onions or potatoes. They wear a mask over their nose so they won't accidentally ingest some bug or germ and kill it. The members are very rich, many being in the diamond business. If someone marries outside the caste the spouse may never be a Jain.

Jain has many similarities to Buddhism. The man who founded it was of a ruling family; he meditated for many years to achieve enlightenment and died in 521. Both Buddhism and Jainism came into India about the same time as a rebuttal to Hinduism. Jains worship no god but have 24 saints. Saint number one was depicted on the lower floor; a black-faced one on the balcony above represented the 24th saint. There were other smaller statues that must have been the other saints. While the pre-wedding ceremony was going on, people came and went paying obeisance to the images.

We next went to see the "Hanging Gardens of Malabar Hill". A shallow layer of earth covers an underground reservoir and on this they have planted low-lying shrubs to form a park. Many of the shrubs are topiaries. I did not walk around with the others for there was no shade and it was very hot.

Vicky pointed out the vultures circling nearby. They were over the Towers of Silence where the Parsi takes their dead to be consumed by the birds.

We crossed the road to a children's playground from which we could see the "Queens Necklace", the beautiful wide arched beach, called Chowpatty. Annually the idols from the temples are taken to be washed in the water and there are parades and singing while the beach is filled to capacity. We made a stop at a huge laundry where men do the washing! Then made a stop at the Gandhi museum. He lived in the house at one time and there are interesting dioramas of his life and copies of the correspondence he had with world leaders and dignitaries.

At the Jehangir art museum we were given audio guides and an hour to tour. It was impossible to see but a fraction of what was there, so I concentrated on the Buddhist wing and sometimes just listened to the wonderful information coming from the guide.

Vicky took us back to the handicraft shop and Scotti decided against the bronze statue she had considered. Then we were dropped at a nearby restaurant. At first it wasn't open. We were too early. When they saw us they opened just for us. A glass wall allowed us to watch the cooking. There was a pit where they did the roasting and a big round thing as big as a beach ball on which they cooked the bread. We ordered far too much but it was all very good. Scotti and I had the cholla kebabs. These were chicken pieces smothered in a delicious rice pudding.

I turned on the television when I got back to my room and learned that an earthquake had hit near Sumatra. This created a Tsunami, a huge tidal wave as high as a house, which had crossed the Bay of Bengal and hit Southern India and Sri Lanka. It is the third largest earthquake since 1900,

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9.0 on the Richter scale. The devastation has been terrible with many thousands killed. It looks like we may have to change some of our plans.

Monday, December 27, 2004. I sent e-mails to my children and various friends to assure them the earthquake had not hurt us.

Then I received a call from the Creative Travel head in New Delhi to tell me that I owed them money for two nights of single occupancy. Kandis and I had decided we would not room together for the days in Mumbai so we could recover from the jet lag. However, our vouchers from General Tours did not say this. He said he would go back to General Tours and find out what we had actually paid for. I cannot believe everything has been so mixed up. I had worried why we had not received a final itinerary, but Susan assured me all would be fine.

All of this hassle made us about a half hour late when we left the Hilton. Then bad traffic delayed us further. We arrived at the airport where the boards told us our flight was already boarding. I got a wheelchair and immediately was soothed that I would make the flight. It still took time until we were at the security gate. Finally our bags were checked and we were "wanded". Then the bus came to transfer us to the flight. Even though I told the man who was pushing me that I could do this on my own, he said he was giving me full service. Two men picked up the chair and carried it onto the bus. He then asked for his tip in dollars, not rupees. This seems to be very common. Evans would not approve but I gave him \$2.

The flight to Cochin was late but they gave us lunch. I declined the main course, which looked like some very spicy dish with rice and had a custard desert with a cookie for my lunch. My system is not prepared for the very spicy food here. Yesterday they put chili peppers in my omelet and I suffered the consequences all day.

A transfer agent named Babu met us and briefed us on our itinerary during the hour-long drive to the Trident Hilton on Cochin Island. The driver, Krishna, will be with us the whole time.

Spent the afternoon getting settled. This involved having the engineering staff to work on the air-conditioning. I don't think the filter had been cleaned in months! Went to dinner with the group in the hotel dining room. Some had walked around outside, Scotti was sick and did not come down.

I have lost my American Express card. I used it at the desk so my Delta number would be on the reservation and have not seen it since.

Tuesday, December 28, 2004. Krishna arrived at 9:00 with our guide, Paul. He turned out to be next to useless. Would answer questions but didn't originate anything on his own.

Cochin is a city made of islands, connected to the mainland by bridges and ferries. The Portuguese and then the English came here wielding their influence. Our first stop was the Church of India, the first European church in India built by the Portuguese. The original church was wood but the British built the present structure of white stucco in 1779. Originally people were buried under the floor of the church but they were moved and the old tomb markers now decorate the walls of the church. Vasco de Gama died in Cochin on Christmas Eve in 1527. His tomb is still shown but his body was moved to Lisbon. The earliest tomb is dated 1512. Two Bibles were displayed. One was in English, the other in the native Malayalam language, which is a lovely curved script, unintelligible to the western eye.

Outside the church were the usual souvenir vendors and one distinctive mendicant beggar. We stopped and watched a snake charmer with his three cobras. Constance even allowed a python to be put around her neck!

We walked to where the fishermen are. All manner of fish for sale, even a fresh water ribbon lobster with skinny body and very long legs! One man tried so hard to sell me a fish. I told him I had no way to use it and he said he would cook it for me. I did not buy. The people will do anything to make a sale.

The fishing nets are unique to Cochin. The nets are attached to wooden structures with a weight on one end. Someone climbs out on the structure causing the net to sink. After a time the net is reeled in bringing its catch with it.

There were souvenir vendors here too and one was selling paintings that had been made on the leaves of a banyan tree.

While the others bargained I perched on my stool in a bit of shade. The temperature is in the high nineties and very humid.

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We then were taken to the Mattancherry Palace, which was built by the Portuguese in 1557. They presented it to the ruler of Cochin as a gesture of goodwill. On the walls are frescos of scenes from the Ramayana and other exhibits show some of the palanquins and ceremonial swords the ruler used. The floors were covered with carpet made of coir, made from palm leaves. The king gave audiences seated in a large swing. He was quite a playboy with many mistresses. A secret room below the floor had a trap door that could close it away. It was decorated with erotic figures.

Our last stop was at the old Pardesi Synagogue located in Cranganore now called Jew Town. Tempting shops line the road to the synagogue. The Jews came to Cranganore, just north of Cochin to trade in spices. It is thought they may have arrived in Kerala in King Solomon's merchant fleet. Another theory is that they are descendents of the Jews taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. It is also said 80,000 Jews arrived on the Malabar Coast in 370 AD refugees from captives taken by Titus Vespasianus. It is also possible they came here during the period of Mohammedan rule. It is clear they came a long time ago. In 1500 the Portuguese came to the Malabar Coast and subjected the Jews to persecution and torture. The Portuguese sacked Jew Town. The Dutch came here in 1661 and the Jews supported them but they paid a heavy penalty in blood when the Dutch withdrew to Ceylon. Jews were being burned at the stake in Goa. The Rajah of Cochin gave them a parcel of land near the royal palace and the synagogue was built.

The synagogue is the oldest built in the British Empire and has a beautiful Chinese blue willow tile floor and numerous and varied antique oil lamps are overhead. The pulpit is in the center of the building. There is a page from a 200-year old Torah on display. Ladies came to services but they sat behind a screen in the balcony. By the early 1950s many of the Jews had immigrated to Israel. Only seven families remain.

We browsed the shops after our visit. It was very hot and I am not a shopper so I went on to the parking place to find Krishna.

When the rest appeared they expressed a desire to have lunch at a local restaurant and to return to the fishing port for more shopping. Krishna took us to a charming out of doors restaurant under a roof, but I yearned for the air-conditioned Hilton. Krishna took me back to the hotel, pausing to show me the St. Francis Church, which was also supposed to be on our tour. I had a bowl of soup for lunch and got my feet up. The others got back by auto-rickshaw and said they had a wonderful time.

That evening we went to see the Kathakali dancing. This art form is indigenous to Kerala. It interprets stories from Hindu classical literature by combining dance and mime. We watched the actors paint their faces, stressing the eyes and eyebrows. The theater held perhaps 60 people with the stage in one corner. It was explained to us that there would be no words spoken. The actors convey their feelings with their eyes and hand gestures. It is hard to describe the dramatic way the actor rolled his eyes and eyebrows to show different emotions. They were love, contempt, sorrow, wrath, bravery, fear dislike, wonder and tranquility or peace. By exaggerated hand gestures two actors were able to mime a play for us. I was glad I had the gestures explained to me beforehand. Both men wore exaggerated costumes with hoop-like skirts, so as they moved, the costumes added to the drama. One of the characters was Arjuna. All the while they were accompanied by two drummers and cymbals, which looked like two trowels, banging together. It made an awful racket. I enjoyed the performance but would not like to hear the music again.

Wednesday, December 29. Krishna drove us about a half hour to where we had a long wait while they prepared our houseboats for us. Some cute children came to watch us and provided Kodak moments. Finally we boarded our houseboats (called Kettuvallan) for the cruise through the backwaters of Kerala. Rainbow Cruises operates 15 of these craft.

Traditional rice boats inspired the houseboats. The hull was somewhat like a fat gondola with a hatchet bow and stern. This style is also used on the snake boats, manned by one hundred pairs of oars for the annual races. On the wooden hull was a caned structure, which held a fairly good size living-dining room and two bedrooms each with private baths. Aft was the cooking area. We had a staff of three: Money the captain, Pelay the cook and Rajish was the engineer that kept our outboard functioning. They houseboat was advertised as having all the amenities. That included

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the mosquito netting that could be lowered over our beds. Needless to say there was no air-conditioning.

That being said, the cruise through the canals of Kerala was enchanting. The canals are interesting being fresh water in the monsoon season and brackish afterward when the streams dry up. Water lilies drift in the current. Many birds were spotted keeping Kandis and Scotti busy identifying them. Rice paddies could be seen behind the embankments and on the embankments were the houses where people lived. The whole area seemed relatively prosperous with the tidy houses sporting thatch roofs. We saw women doing their laundry by pounding it on a rock. We saw fishermen. One was even using a bow and arrow to shoot the fish. Their narrow wooden canoes could really move, although sometimes they were so laden that there was not more than two inches of freeboard! Palm trees, cows, chickens, all gave us an intimate look into how the people lived. Occasionally there was a temple or a church. We met other cruising houseboats, no two exactly alike. Some even had a second floor. It was very relaxing to glide along the canals.

Pelay produced a delicious lunch and then, after we tied up for the night, a delicious dinner. We had stopped at one of the villages for beer to go with the food. Kandis and I shared our houseboat, the Violet, with Scotti and Mac. Evans and Charity had Peter and Constance with them on the Nimmi. We visited each others craft and some even walked into a nearby village. After Evans reported stepping into some fire ants I had no desire to go with them.

We had a fan in our room to circulate the air and slept well on our hard-as-a-board mattresses. I slept uncovered most of the night for it was too hot to wrap up in the sheet.

Thursday, December 29. After a cold shower and omelet breakfast we got under way. We saw fishermen, probing for shellfish with their poles. We entered Lake Vembaraid, the largest lake in India, and at 10:30 AM were tying up at the Kumarakom Resort.

This whole property is on reclaimed land and since the canal, lake and ocean are on different levels, the resort sits on a sort of polder (the only place in the world after Holland to use this method of claiming land from the sea).

The buildings in the resort are all either two hundred year old buildings that have been moved here or are cottages built in the old style. No two are alike. Dark wood beams, elaborate locks, our cottage featured an outdoor shower and a soaking tub (I did not have time to try the latter).

Since it was Christmas week, there were exhibits of various crafts going on, even a palm reader. He told me I would have a long life and live to be 85. 85 doesn't look that far away! He told Kandis and even Constance the same thing. Since he guessed I had three or four children but never detected that I had had two husbands, I came to the conclusion that his predictions were not too accurate. I watched the coir (palm fiber) being woven into rope, which in turn could be fashioned into carpets. There was a potter who demonstrated his craft on a wheel mounted inside a larger wheel that looked like a tire. He spun it around and before my eyes created a vase. One interesting exhibit was recreating the ancient art of writing on palm leaves. Elaborate and colorful drawings were being produced.

In the shop I found great souvenirs and bought gifts to take home.

Then I had an Ayyurvedic massage. Ayyurvedic medicine originated in Kerala. I was asked to disrobe and put on panties that looked as if they were fashioned from a shower cap. Then I was placed on a stool while the masseuse rubbed oils into my hair and massaged my head. This went on for some time. Then I was asked to lie down on the wooden table in the room. She rubbed me with all sorts of heated oils and actually slapped them into parts of my body. I shortly felt like a greased pig. When she asked me to turn over, the table was so greasy I felt I might fall onto the floor. For my thumb joint, she produced a hot rock wrapped in a cloth and massaged the joint with it. More oils followed and then finally a scrub of some gritty brown mixture. When I was ushered into the adjoining bathroom, I looked in the mirror and it looked like I was a greased pig who had been wallowing in the mud! I was given some pieces of coir for a washcloth and some shampoo. I scrubbed and scrubbed and at last was clean again. I also felt wonderful. I hope to have another opportunity for an Ayyurvedic massage.

Most of us went on a sunset cruise, with traditional music to entertain us.

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We had dinner in the fish restaurant where we ordered from menus instead going to the buffet. The prices were much better than at the buffet. Mac had treated for our buffet lunch and we were shocked that it cost \$28 each!

Friday, December 31. At 7:00 AM I joined a yoga class near the pool. It was beautiful to see the lake waking up. Fishermen were starting out in their narrow canoes. Mist clung to the trees.

I have taken yoga for two or three years but only from a private instructor. This was my first class. We started with 12 prayers to the rising sun, breathing as we stretched our arms and legs. I had done some of the positions before but mostly from a sitting position. I was not prepared to stand so long. Then we stretched out on our mats to relax and meditate. "Think of yourself as a feather in the wind", he said. Then there were more positions ending with one where you lie on your stomach and grab your ankles and then gently rock! In short I got much more than I bargained for.

We left our paradise and headed up into the hills to Thekkady. The Western Ghats are a mountain range, some rising to 10000 feet. Krishna maneuvered the hairpin turns and switchbacks with expertise; stopping often to show us what was going on in the various plantations.

One stop was at a rubber plantation. The trees are milked each day and sulphuric acid and water are poured over the liquid that is placed in tubs. After a couple of hours the rubber has congealed and it is taken to the press to get rid of the moisture. A second press adds texture to the sheet, which is now ready to be fashioned into the flip-flops that everyone wears. The sheet resembles a rubber bathmat. Kandis bought one to take home as a gift for a friend but we realized after getting back in the van that it smelled so I don't think it will be easy to travel with.

We stopped to see coffee, vanilla and pepper plants. I was interested in the nutmeg. When you open the shell the nutmeg is white and streaked with what looks like red plastic. This part of the fruit is mace. The nutmeg is the white kernel, which goes through several processes until it becomes the nutmeg we know at home. The remaining meat in the shell is fed to the cattle so nothing is wasted.

Krishna also stopped so the shutterbugs could photograph some emaciated oxen. Their charm was their painted long horns.

Then we had a restroom stop at a local place in the hills. We went down a steep flight of stairs to find the "squat" toilets. These are not my favorites but I was in no position to fuss about it. Scotti bought us some Kit Kat bars, which turned out to be lunch.

There was a colorful nursery where all sorts of plants were grown. Many were easily recognizable since we have these same annuals at home (but not in December!)

Another stop was to tour the Callemara Tea Plantation. Tea plants are always so trim and look like they have been pruned to the same shape. First the tea is washed in hot water and then it is baked until it is dry. Some very noisy machinery then sifts the leaves, weeding out the chaff. Several siftings later, the result is cooked to a powder so it can be put into tea bags. After all of that I thought we should have been offered a cup but all they had was a stand to buy the untasted tea!

Seven hours later we reached Thekkady, the spice capital of India. It's a bustling town full of spice shops and enticing souvenir shops. I was very stiff and sore from the drive and went to get my feet up while the others explored the town. The Spice Village Resort is a comedown from Kumarakom. Our room is basically furnished in rough pine furniture. Not only does it lack a TV set, it also lacks any sort of temperature control. We are in mosquito country but there are no nets! After getting housekeeping twice I finally learned you have to hold the toilet flusher down a long time to clear the bowl. I also needed help to set the safe combination without setting off an alarm. Outside the air is lightly perfumed with sewer gas. In short it is not my sort of place!

We ate early (7:30) at the only two tables, which overlooked the dance exhibition. It was a buffet dinner. Kandis picked up the check saying she wanted to treat because it was her birthday.

Then it was early to bed. The hotel had cancelled their New Year celebration in favor of sending the money to help the disaster areas. There was also a box in the lobby where people could donate. The death toll is now 100,000 and rising.

The Pacific Rim has an early warning system when there is to be a Tsunami. One had never been installed in the Bay of Bengal since until now it has been relatively free of earthquakes. It

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was known two or three hours ahead that there would be these waves as tall as palm trees, but no one knew how to warn people. After the fact, they are now setting up an early warning system. Many lives could have been saved if there had been one now. The wave took almost two hours to reach the Indian Coast. They are still having aftershocks in Sumatra and the Andaman Islands, but they have been more in the 5.5 to 6.0 ranges, which does not produce tsunamis.

Saturday, January 1, 2005. I woke to the ringing of our doorbell. The maid wanted to pick up my laundry. It was raining. Everyone says it is auspicious when it rains on the New Year.

At 9:30 Krishna and the guide, Matthew, picked us up and we went to two spice plantations. Matthew is very good about identifying everything. Cocoa is interesting. When the nut is opened it looks a bit like sweetbreads.

The last stop was at a spice shop, obviously one from which he would get a kickback, but I decided to walk back to the hotel because I had spotted a photography shop and was in hopes of replacing the battery to my camera and making it work again. No such luck, but I did poke my nose into a number of shops. After one or two everything looks alike.

I got a chicken sandwich and Pepsi at the teashop and then Kandis came with the bad news. They can wash my laundry but the drier isn't working. I will just have to carry it on to the next stop.

I met Scotti and Mac and, after they also got a light lunch, Scotti and I went shopping. I really didn't plan to get anything but did end up with a papier-mâché mask of Arjuna, the character we saw in the Kathakali dancing.

Krishna came at 3:30 to take us to nearby Periyar Park. This artificial lake was created by the British and is a noted wildlife sanctuary. Matthew had tried to talk us into a morning or early afternoon tour, but we had been told the best time was in late afternoon. We held out for the later departure despite the fact that there would be great crowds of people. Matthew met us at the entrance to go down to the boats, but made us wait while another large group he was caring for went ahead of us. We finally walked down to the line for the upper deck as directed. However, Matthew had neglected to give us our tickets so we were not allowed to board. Once the upper deck had boarded, they then started loading the lower deck. Peter and Evans ran back and found Matthew who came down and straightened it out. By then the only seats left were in the middle of the lower deck where you could not see anything. We ended up standing on the stern deck where I carved out a space for my cane seat near the rail and that is how we had our cruise. Krishna told us later we were supposed to be part of the larger group but the word never got out. We never saw Matthew again, which was good because I was not going to tip him. This is the second bad guide we have had!

The lake is a narrow ribbon between the hills. Old dead trees are everywhere providing nesting places for birds. One cormorant nest had a baby in it. We spotted an elephant and a herd of deer. There was also a herd of wild pigs. I was disappointed that there weren't more animals being spoiled by trips to Africa. Mac wanted to see a tiger, but though the park has some, they are very rare.

There were some young men from Madras who had come to get away from the tragedy there. One man's house had been damaged and he was not allowed to even go to see it. They took a fancy to Peter. I think they thought he was the actor who plays Spider Man. They insisted on having their picture taken with him. We also got someone to take a group photo of us.

Being tired of buffets we walked down to another restaurant that had a menu. Everyone ordered something different and we passed the dishes around, except for Mac who does not like to share. The food was wonderful. I even enjoyed some of the spicy dishes. We had more group photos taken since this is the last time we will be together. The Harrells are spending another two or three days here. The McCarthys and I are going on to Tamil Nadu.

Sunday, January 2. Kandis left early to go back to California. The Harrells got up early to take a trek. Thus we had no one to see us off.

We drove to the border of Tamil Nadu. It took Krishna a while to pay the tax. The nearby shops were just opening.

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We enjoyed seeing more and more barefoot pilgrims headed for the Ayyappa Shrine in the mountains for the eighteen-day annual festival. If they came by bus, the bus was heavily garlanded with flowers. If on foot they carried a modest amount of possessions on their heads. Mostly men go to the opening of this temple each year. Women are only allowed if they are younger than puberty or older than menopause. The men must forego sex for the month. The paper reported over 20,000 pilgrims made the pilgrimage this year.

As soon as we entered Tamil Nadu there was a different atmosphere. A green thumb created Kerala, a dry thumb created Tamil Nadu. Kerala is the most populated of the Indian States. Tamil Nadu is known as the land of temples. We drove through forests down through the Western Ghats and saw almost no one. When we reached the flat plain we found the area agricultural with plantations of coconuts, vegetables, rice paddies and grapes. The road was busy with herds of Brahmin cows and goats, donkeys and bullock carts.

Krishna stopped so we could see a huge public laundry in one river. It was well organized with some of the clothing even being hung on clotheslines.

Another stop was to watch women working in the fields. We saw a herd of water buffalo bathing in another river.

The local people travel on foot, bicycles, motorbikes, buses, white air-conditioned cabs or motorized three-wheel yellow and black auto-rickshaws. It is rare to see a private car. The trucks are highly decorated in colorful designs.

We stopped at a brickyard and watched then put the clay mixture into a wooden two-brick mold. The molded bricks dry in the sun for two days to harden and then are placed in a thatch-covered shed so they can be fired with a wood fire.

And so, 134 kilometers later, we came to Madurai and the Taj Garden Hotel, which is perched on a hill over-looking the city. It was originally a private home and the grounds are beautifully landscaped. The main problem is that there is a long climb to get from our room to the View Restaurant and an even longer climb from there up to reception.

Scotti and I headed for the health club and some Auyurvedic rejuvenation. It was much like the one at Kumarakom with the addition of flute music in the room. I was dressed in a thong-like garment. I really like the warm oils. This time I was given a dish of the greenish mud mixture and told to put it on myself to help my shower remove the oils. The girl neglected to give me soap to wash so I used my thong as a washcloth and did the best I could. My hair was still a mess when I was done. Back in my room I need another shower and a shampoo. I couldn't make the shower work and had to kneel under the faucet for the shampoo, which wasn't the greatest in the world but did make me presentable.

We climbed up to reception for the folklore show. It wasn't very good. The performer did some balancing acts with an ornate hat and then asked some of the audience to dance with him. We declined.

We had dinner on the terrace overlooking the city. The view was lovely and we could make out the huge temple we have come here to see. Unfortunately the band was playing cowboy music to entertain us, which did not add to the atmosphere.

Monday, January 3. Madurai is a very old city. Parvati was born in this town, the daughter of a Pandyan king. Shiva courted and married her. The great Meenakshi temple is actually dedicated to Parvati. It is the second most holy Hindu site after Benares on the Ganges. Our guide was Moorthy.

The temple is huge, (847 by 792 feet), the largest Hindu temple in the world. On its outer walls stand five magnificent gopurams or towers. Each is covered with painted sculptures depicting Shiva and Parvati. We started our tour in the audience hall of a thousand pillars (actually there are 985). Each pillar is beautifully and uniquely sculpted. We are shown a picture of the emerald lingam of Parvati, but will not be allowed to go into the inner sanctum where it was for we are not Hindu. There were also exhibits showing the huge chariot that is paraded through the city on ceremonial occasions.

We were allowed to view the smaller chapels in the temple and the great golden lotus pool inside. Everywhere there were people expressing devotion. In one area hundreds of women were seated on the floor in group prayer. We bought a small cup of oil and burned it to Shiva. This entitled us to have the sacred ash rubbed on our forehead. We received the sacred ash and a

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blessing in almost all the temples we toured. I have always felt that prayer in all its forms is good for the soul.

A big thrill was to be here on an auspicious day when garlanded images of Lord Shiva and Parvati, mounted on silver bulls, are paraded through the main streets near the temple, followed by lesser litters carrying images of their children. We first heard the chanting and then the bells as the images came back into the temple and passed within feet of us.

At another spot, you could buy pieces of ghee or butter and throw them at the image of Shiva. This was literally buttering up the God to be good to you.

Scotti and Mac climbed one of the tall towers while I waited in a shop near the temple. In a back room there were many statues of Buddha and a five-metal bronze reclining Sri Lanka Buddha "spoke" to me. The metals are gold silver, copper, zinc and tin. The mesmerizing salesman made me want to have it for my collection and I spent a lot of money that should probably have been used to help the victims of the Tsunami.

However, India is saying that they do not need outside aid for their share of the disaster. This may be a political statement of some sort for 25000 Indians have lost their lives, one third of them children. There are also many orphans, which the Indian government promises to care for. The death toll in all the countries involved is now 150,000, with many more missing and presumed dead.

We were taken to a local restaurant for lunch and back to the hotel for a rest. Scotti and Mac went out again in the evening to see a Sound and Light performance at the old palace, which is being renovated. Krishna warned there would be mosquitoes and since I am not taking malaria medicine, I did not go. I had dinner in the restaurant, which had a man playing a zither, an improvement over the cowboy music last night. I also found they have an al la Carte menu, a pleasant change from the monotonous buffets.

Tuesday, January 4. We drove to Tiruchirappalli, commonly known as Trichy. There were granite outcroppings and relatively few people along the way. We saw a couple of heavily laden trucks carrying relief supplies to the Tsunami victims, It took two hours but Krishna stopped once so we could watch rice being harvested and than again at the small town of Viralipurn (name uncertain) with a gopuram high above it on a temple to Shiva. We did not climb the many steps to pay our respects. It was interesting to look at the small shops selling everything from flower leis to synthetic saris. Many of them had designs in rice flour at the door called koloom. This is done from mid December to mid January for good luck. They sweep their doorsteps every morning so the designs can be applied.

At last we got to Trichy, which was once the citadel of the Chola dynasty. It is a modern city of four million people. The Cholas ruled for 400 years. The Dutch built the Jesuit College and Cathedral in the 16th century.

Here we discover that there are two sects in Hinduism. One worships Shiva, the other Vishnu. The Srirangam Vishnu Temple is quite handsome. Seven gates precede the temple in each of the cardinal directions representing the nine planets (two of the gates did not seem important). The whole complex covers about a square mile and is like a town with shops and residential areas. Vishnu reclines on a bed of a coiled five-headed serpent and his vehicle is the Garuda bird. The temple claims to be the richest temple in the world. Rome is second.

Our guide told us that the Hindus were the people who made the golden calf in the Bible. He said they were the people who built the pyramids before they came to India. He pointed out sculptures that seemed to have an Egyptian heritage. He told us that Hindus have a trinity, Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma. There is a legend of a great flood in Hinduism. He compared the Hindus to Christianity in many ways. He even implied that Jesus came to Asia Minor in his early life.

The temple was built with a mortar of limestone powder, egg whites and jaggery (from sugar cane). It is embellished with bold figures colorfully painted. There is an entirely different feel than at a Shiva Temple. Vishnu has many reincarnations. The temple feeds 1000 poor people each day but we did not see this. The only thing we did see was a lunch stand and a few people sitting around. People come to the temple to picnic. We could not enter the inner sanctum for we are not Hindu

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Our guide took us up on the roof so we could see the whole complex and admire the many gopurams. The tiled roof was hot in the sun and since we were barefoot, not too pleasant to walk on, but the view was great. One of the towers was starkly white. It had been primed but not yet painted. The towers are painted every eight years.

Next we were taken to the Rock Fort temple, with 250 steps to climb to see how it is carved out of the mountain. Mac and I delegated Scotti to go check it out for us. While I was waiting for her, two English ladies approached me and said we were the first Americans they had seen. There are few Caucasian tourists here for they have been scared away by the Tsunami. This is devastating for the tourism business as it is now the high season.

After lunch we drove on to Thanjavur, known as the place of refuge. The town is known for its handicrafts and supplies them all over the world. They do bronzes from sand molds and reverse paintings on glass among others. The area is also known as the "granary of the south." We checked into the Hotel Sangam.

Our goal is the renowned temple of Brahadeeswara, built by the greatest Chola emperor, Raja Rajan (988-1012). It is considered the greatest contribution to Dravidian architecture and is a UNESCO protected site. It is like a 14-tiered pyramid with an 81.3-ton 13-foot high golden granite crown. The crown was put in place by elephants hauling it up a six-kilometer long inclined plane. There is a huge Nandi and various other outbuildings inside the fort, which has a moat. Our guide led us to a Government run art store but we were too tired to enjoy it.

Wednesday, January 5. We drove to Pondicherry. On the way we stopped at Mamallapuram, which was the port city of the Pallavas in the 7th century. We drove to Mamallapuram on a toll road! You could almost do 40 miles an hour! Toll roads in India have people living along them but the traffic is much less than on the ordinary roads. The marvelous sculptures at Mamallapuram have survived because sand dunes covered them up until the British uncovered them a century ago.

There are many monoliths carved from the granite outcroppings. Some are friezes, some are temples. At one spot a huge balance rock in the shape of a granite ball looked as if it could roll down any minute. Small boys were enjoying sliding in its shadow. The souvenir vendors were very persistent here, using the sob story that there were no tourists. I pointed out that I couldn't make up for the lost business but I did relent and bought a small stone ball with temple figures carved in it. This town is known for its stone carving industry. I am constantly amazed by how cheap anything handmade can be.

There are no marriages in January as it is not auspicious. Temples are community centers not just for worshipping. Since the Tsunami many people have moved into the temples because their homes have been destroyed.

The marvelous sculptures at Mamallapuram have survived because sand dunes covered them up until the British uncovered them a century ago.

We drove on to Pondicherry and checked into the Anandha Inn, a businessman's hotel. I did find a bronze dancing Shiva statuette in the hotel shop to add to my collection. That night we had dinner at the Rendezvous Restaurant, which is a rooftop garden. We caught an auto rickshaw coming and going. It was fun if a little crowded with three of us in it! There weren't many people there, another reminder that the tourists all cancelled their plans when they heard about the tsunami.

We have cancelled our plans for Sri Lanka. Even though we were assured we could go, it just didn't seem right. Creative Travel is working out an itinerary in Karnataka, the state just north of here.

Thursday, January 6. Our guide took us to Kanchipuram, the capital city of the Pallavas from the 6th to the 8th century.

On the way we passed a huge salt manufactory. Seawater is brought into paddies and dried. The tsunami ruined 75% of the operation according to the paper. There were chain gangs of women stomping in the paddies trying to force out the unwanted water.

This town is known for its silk manufacturing and we saw them stretching the long silk thread in preparation for the loom. They also were dyeing the silk. We entered one shop where we could see the weaving being done on hand looms. A sari is 6 feet long and an extra piece of material is

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included so that a matching blouse can be made. Then there was the inevitable stop at the cooperative shop, but I didn't buy anything.

Kanchipuram has about 125 recognizable sites out of an estimated thousand temples. A lot of it is being reconstructed and repaired. The temples at Kanchipuram were originally crowned with gold but the gold has been stolen. The site dates from 200 BC. They pointed out a 2500 year-old mango tree, but unfortunately it died last year. The friezes and sculptures recount the history of the Pallavas and their constant battles with the Cholas.

Pondicherry is a Union Territory rather than a state. The French built this attractive town in the shape of an oval. The oval is divided by a canal, which marks the boundary of white town and black town. The French built lovely colonial buildings in their section. They left in 1956. The police still wear French Kepis. Today, most of White town is in the hands of the Ashram. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1915) and the Mother Mirraalfassa started the Ashram. It is spiritual rather than religious. This is a sort of collective. To enter you have a six-month apprenticeship to see if you want to join. Then you must deed over all your worldly goods to the Ashram that will then take care of you for the rest of your life. There are 2500 Ashramites and while the founders are long dead, pictures of them are all over and they are honored with flowers.

One of the Ashram's big industries is a handmade paper plant. It was interesting to see the process where t-shirt scraps are washed and boiled in bleach. Then the pulp is patterned using flower petals, rice husks, sugar cane and straw. When it is dry, the finished product is ironed. It makes a lovely grade of rag paper that can be used in greeting cards, file folders and so forth. They can't work in the rainy season for the paper won't dry. 250 workers are in the plant and are paid about 100 rupees a day (about \$2.50). The paper is quality controlled and the waste is recycled.

We entered a meditation hall which was a courtyard filled with potted plants that are changed twice a day. Silence is in order here and we were given the chance to meditate for five minutes.

The Ashram has a library of books for meditation.

Nearby is a Ganesh Temple. The French didn't like having the temple in their town and twice threw the image into the sea. Twice it mysteriously returned to its spot in the temple so it was allowed to remain. Ganesh is a son of Shiva and Pavarti. His father thought he was an interloper and cut off his head. When he learned it was his own son, he told a servant to go and bring back the first head he could find. The servant found an elephant, so Ganesh is always shown with an elephant head. He is plump and jolly and you can't help but like him. Outside the temple is a real live elephant. You feed him bananas and then he will give you a blessing by putting his trunk on your head.

Friday, January 7. We drove to Chennai on the toll road, where our agent is another Anthony and our guide is Ravathy. The British bought a small bit of land from a man named Madras on which to build a fort. The city has grown and grown until it is now a city of 6 million people. Madras is now known by its original Indian name of Chennai. The traffic was horrible. We really like the smaller towns.

There is a statue of Gandhi near the promenade that follows the beach. The beach is 13 kilometers long, as long as the one in Miami. There were still signs of the cleanup and one boat that was high and dry far from the water, but basically it was all back to normal. In the Tsunami the water came up over the promenade reaching the foundations of the buildings across the road. India has been so lucky. Only 15,000 have lost their lives, most of them in the Andomen Islands. We did not go to where the fisherman villages were. These people have lost everything they own, their families, homes and their livelihood. They are very proud people and do not appreciate being given used clothing and treated like charity. The best thing the Indian government can do is to get their boats back to running condition. There was much fanfare in the paper when they got the first three boats back in the water.

I did manage to get to American Express. I lost my card many days ago and reported it missing. Then I found it! So I wanted it reinstated. They can't do that. It would take four days to get another card! So much for the ads, which tell you, they will replace it within a couple of days! I will deal with it when I return home.

We stopped at St Thomas Basilica, which was built in 1893 over an older site. St Thomas (Doubting Thomas) was here from 52 AD to 72 AD. Our guide told us that only here and in Rome

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at St Peter's could you visit the grave of one of the disciples. He had not heard of St James shrine in Santiago de Compostello, Spain. In the courtyard many women were sitting waiting for an official to come and distribute relief materials.

We finally got to the fort, which seemed more like a white painted colonial village than a fort. Unfortunately the museum and church had closed early for the various ministers were meeting to make decisions about the tsunami relief.

Saturday, January 8. We were up before dawn to catch the train and say farewell to Krishna who has been such a wonderful driver.

We were in the air-conditioned first class car. It reminded me of Amtrak. Everyone had a reserved seat. One difference was that they pulled the car with us sitting backward. They also brought us water and fed us both breakfast and lunch. Scotti and Mac walked back to look at second class and reported it had harder seats, three on one side of the aisle, two on the other. The open windows were barred to keep the people from sticking their heads or arms out. Scotti hopes Mac will have second thoughts about their traveling second class on their last weeks in India.

For seven hours we wiggled and wobbled and jerked from Chennai to Mysore. The scenery was open countryside most of the way with outcroppings of huge granite boulders, some piled into a hill. John would have loved the train ride. I found it so unstable I couldn't walk around very much. I arrived in Mysore so stiff and sore all I could think of was to go to bed for a nap when we reached the hotel.

The Metropol Hotel is probably 100 years old. It was closed for fifteen years and has been recently reconditioned. It reminds me of some of the old hotels my grandmother took me to as a child. There is an open courtyard and an attractive restaurant. However, I needed help to turn on some of the lights (one you plugged in or unplugged by hand). I also never did master the water. Had a cold shower, but I washed my hair anyway. There were all sorts of switches in the room but most didn't seem to do anything. One lamp was operated by plugging and unplugging it. The other public rooms were also splendid.

Scotti and Mac went out and explored and when they returned took me to a native handicraft market across the street where Scotti bought me a lovely embroidered Kashmiri jacket for about \$5.

Sunday, January 9. Nagarajah, our driver, and Mahesh the guide picked us up for an all day tour. Our Toyota minivan is very cramped with 5 people in it and we put Mahesh between Scotti and me in the back seat so we could hear him. After lunch I suggested we get a bigger car for the drive to Bangalore, but that didn't seem possible. However Mahesh said he would come separately to our stops by bus.

We drove to Srirangapuri, which was once the capital of Hyderali and his son Tipu Sultan, the "Tiger of Mysore". Tipu had two wives and 500 concubines. He ruled all of South India in the 18th century.

We went to a Vishnu Temple built by Tipu Sultan for his Hindu subjects, The tall Gopuram or tower had five pots on top of it representing the five elements: sky, earth, fire, water and air. Vishnu was shown sitting on a cobra floating on a symbolic sea of milk. The lingam was a black image of Vishnu garlanded with flowers. There was a small image of Vishnu being "battered" and if you touched his feet and then your eyes or chest it brought you luck

We got there in time for a ceremony for this is an auspicious day. The three Brahmin priests were chanting mantras over the offerings of mango leaves, which were dipped in oil and offered to a canvas depicting the sun god. Mango leaves were for prosperity, the basil leaves had curative powers. They were also offering flowers. Some of the offerings were hoisted on the flagstaff. A flagstaff always indicates an active temple. There was music from a horn reminiscent of the one we saw in Tibet. They were also "battering up" the god. When I unfolded my cane seat they indicated I had to either stand or sit on the ground and I chose the latter. The ceremony went on for some time, and at last they brought out the image of Vishnu out and paraded it around the flagstaff.

There were many people there to see it. We were the only Caucasians. Many were tours of schoolchildren who were being taken around to learn about their heritage. They were anxious to

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try out their English on us and when Scotti took their picture they were very excited to see the preview on her digital camera. These phenomena happened over and over again in Karnataka. Sometimes they wanted their picture taken with us, a few even had cameras and took our picture. I was asked for my autograph and felt like such a celebrity!

Tippu Sultan came from Baghdad and in 1784 built a summer palace in the Mogul style. It has protective green shades to protect the wonderful frescos inside. One battle scene was memorable, for the artist even made the horses have terrified expressions. The upper part of the mural depicts the Nizam of Hyderabad. He was a traitor so a pig is shown with him. The palace is made of wood but is painted to look like tiles.

Although of humble parentage, Tippu Sultan was educated and wise. A Muslim, he allowed Shiva and Pavarti to be pictured on coins. He built an ornate white mosque with two minarets. He even built a church for his Christian subjects. We also went to the tomb of Tippu Sultan who was killed here by the British.

Returning to Mysore, we were taken to an Indian restaurant for lunch. After that we went to see the magnificent palace of the Maharajah of Mysore. The British restored the Maharajahs about a hundred years ago. The old palace burned in 1897 and the British built this one new for \$10,000. Mac was so impressed he offered to buy it for \$10000! No sale. At the time the Maharajah was a ten-year-old boy and his regent, his mother, is the one for whom this opulent building was designed.

We entered a huge hall, which reminded me of the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. One magnificent room was the hall of marriages. It had a beautiful Belgian etched-glass ceiling. The large audience hall had many columns and blue and gold décor. The private audience hall had gold decoration and cut glass peacocks in the ceiling. The other public rooms were also impressive. In one hall they had pictures of the royal family. The palace was part of a huge complex that included temples and so forth, but we only toured the palace,

We finished the tour by going up Chamundi Hill to see the 300-year old huge solid granite Nandi that overlooks the city.

Each Sunday the palace is lit up and Mac and Scotti went back in the evening to see it. I can wait to see the pictures.

Monday, January 10. There was an article in the paper about tourists who were going into the distressed areas to take pictures of the victims. I can't imagine what kind of ghouls they must be.

We drove to Srirangapatnam. Along the way we stopped at a market town where they were selling all sorts of things: cows, goats, sheep, vegetables, clothing, household goods. We walked around while Nagarajah had a rest stop.

Mahest met us at Sriangapatnam to show us this very interesting Jain Temple. A huge monolith of granite was 400 feet high. Dominating the top was a 58-foot high statue of the naked saint Bhagwan Bahubali. Twisting around his legs were carved jungle vines representing the perfect concentration the saint achieved while doing his meditation. It is a very simple but impressive statue, which was carved in 981 AD, although the site has a history dating back to the 3rd century BC. This is the holiest of all Jain Temples. Rather than climb the stairway cut out of the rock, I hired bearers to take me to the top in a wicker chair. Scotti also took a lift, but macho Mac climbed all the way up and down again. Inside the lovely temple itself are carvings of the 24 saints of the Jains, all stark naked. To become a Jain you must renounce all your worldly good, including clothing. The 24 saints are repeated on the other side of the temple. The Jains are very charitable if you can judge from the numerous pots asking for offerings. Of course we did oblige. My bearers first wanted to bring me down facing forward but after about ten steps I realized I might fall out and talked them into carrying me down backward. It was hard work for them and I tipped them each 100 rupees. Much to my surprise a fifth bearer appeared and also wanted his tip. I guess he was a relief man.

Thousands of Jain pilgrims from all over the world come for the Mahamastakabhisheka ceremony, which is held every twelve years. Then they anoint the statue by pouring pots of milk, ghee, saffron, coconut milk, poppy seeds and other items, each of which carries some significance. Next year we are cordially invited to come back for the ceremony, but I don't think I would want to be here with thousands of people.

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We drove on to the lovely Taj Chickmagalar Hotel. Scotti and I went for massages. They talked me out of the Ayyurvedic massage and did something else that used the same oils. I did not like it as much as Ayyurvedic. The worse part is that I hurt as much afterward as I did before. This has been a tough trip with all the climbing and walking. They also did not have a place to shower and I had to walk back to my room with my hair a mess until I could shower.

Tuesday, January 11. We drove to Belur, a small town that was once the capital of the Hoysala Empire. Here is a wonderful temple called Channakeshava, built in 1116 AD, the same age as when the great cathedrals of Europe were being built. King Vishnuvardhana commissioned the temple. It may have been painted at one time, but now it is a wonderful gray granite edifice. Every square inch is carved with figures telling stories of mythology. Some of the carvings have signatures of the carvers. Inside the temple is very dark and has a round platform for dancers. Vishnu was reincarnated nine times. At one point we viewed a carving of the huge footprints of Vishnu. One small boy was trying to stand on them but his mother restrained him. Someone died today and the lingam was closed off. It was probably a priest or a Brahmin to get this honor. After seeing us, a priest came and opened the door so we could see the large red figure

One legend is about a noted sculptor named Jakanachari. He carved an enormous Ganesha and went away on a trip of some years. When he returned a young boy pronounced the statue unfit for worship. The sculptor challenged the boy to prove it and said he would cut off his arm if proven wrong. The boy picked up a stick and hit the statue's navel. It burst open revealing a frog squatting in the damp stone. Obviously the stone was defective. The sculptor cut off his arm only to learn that the boy was his own forgotten son who had learned the art of perfection. He went and meditated many years and got his arms back and was reunited with his wife and son. One of the temples in the complex is the Kape Chanerai Temple. Kape means frog.

You could spend days and not have time to examine all the carvings. There were tours of schoolchildren and a group of pilgrims all dressed in black. Some of the children wanted my autograph. Needless to say, we were about the only Caucasians around. They also wanted to have their picture taken with me. Sitting on my cane seat, with them all crowding around, I was almost toppled over.

We went on to Halebid and another wonderful temple in the same style. This temple was really two temples, one dedicated to Pavarti and one to Shiva. Two enormous Nandi's were here, the 5th and 6th largest Nandis in existence. They were beautifully carved. The sculpture in Halebid was even more impressive than at Belur. A frieze of elephants ran around the base of the star shaped platform, figuratively holding it up. The star shape allowed for more sculptures to be displayed. People learn from the sculptures. Some even were erotic and showed sex scenes.

These temples sat on a soapstone base and I was embarrassed that my cane seat scratched it. The rubber tips have long since worn off and the cane sits on its own aluminum legs. I guess in the future I will have to carry an extra set of tips. The cane has certainly earned its keep!

We said goodbye to Mahesh and drove making only one pit stop to Bangalore. It was over four hours. We checked into the Grand Ashok Hotel to find the lobby was being renovated. The dust from the sanders was overwhelming.

We had our farewell dinner in the lovely restaurant on the 8th floor overlooking the city. It was a Chinese dinner, which didn't seem fitting, but it was delicious.

Wednesday, January 12. Bangladore. The Grand Astok Hotel is miserable. The elevators work on their own plan so it is a gamble where or even when the darned thing will stop. My tub was so dirty I didn't even want to take a shower in it. It had been a government run hotel. The new private owners have a lot of work to do.

The paper reports that a lot of Bangalore's homeless have gone south to Chenai to take advantage of the handouts. I found this a humorous touch instead of the continuing tales of how bad the catastrophe has been, particularly in Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

After breakfast we had a city tour of Bangladore. This is the silicon valley of India so there were many signs of prosperity. Lots of private cars and traffic. There are more than 20 colleges and universities. Education is being pushed all over India. The city is 60% Hindu, 20% Muslim, 10-15% Christian and the rest are Jains or Parsis.

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The guide pointed out the buildings built by the British, painted the distinctive red as we saw in Chennai. Many of the streets have British names. We drove past the handsome parliament building. They have an upper house in which each of the districts in Karnataka is represented and then a lower house of appointed celebrities and dignitaries.

We walked through the lovely Lolbagh Botanical Garden with plants from all over the world. Tipu Sultan started it in 1760. Republic Day is January 26, and all the grounds were being manicured in preparation. There is a flower clock and a statue of the maharajah, Sri Chama Raja Wodeyar. Tall trees bend toward the sun. Queen Elizabeth planted one tree 40 years ago. The glass house or Crystal Palace is a large empty greenhouse where floral displays will be put for the celebration. Albert, Prince of Wales laid the cornerstone 100 years ago. The last part of the garden is a 3000-millennium-year-old piece of granite, thought to be the oldest rock on earth. It reminded me of Stone Mountain. As Mac said "A nice Gneiss"!

Our next stop was at Tipu Sultan's summer palace. Made of teak, it is similar to the one in Mysore, The British destroyed half of it and then it was used as a school so the murals were destroyed. Thus it was not swathed in plastic for preservation sake and we could see the wonderful Moorish architecture of the building. The palace itself is empty. Next door was a Vishnu Temple but we did not go to it.

Then we went to the Nandi Temple, built by the founder of the city. It was nice to see a temple to this genial bull. There are 7 Nandi monoliths in the country and this one is one of the largest. It is handsomely decorated. The tall flagstaff is also carved granite. A small Shiva shrine sits behind it, but Nandi is the main event here. I made a namaste and donated to the priest so I could run my fingers over the flame and put the red powder on my forehead. I got a little too much on and everyone got a good laugh out of it. We dropped Scotti and Mac off to go shopping and I went back to the hotel to finish packing.

At 2:30 we were taken to the airport for our hour and a half flight to Mumbai. Once there we said farewell. Scotti and Mac are spending three more weeks in India. I was taken to the nearby Kempinski Leila Hotel, a handsome hotel, where I had a delicious chicken club sandwich, a long soaky bath and tried to get four hours of sleep.

January 13. The long road home. They called at 11:00 PM to confirm my wakeup call for 12:30 AM! Anthony picked me up at 1:00 and took me to the airport. The business class lounge was nothing, just a room in back of a pay bar, but at least it was quiet. Delta was running late. We didn't take off until 4 AM. I slept most of the way to Paris. Of course I missed my flight but Delta brought me home on another flight and so I walked in my door about 6PM.

On my return everyone wanted to know about the tsunami. This has been a disaster of historic proportions! The Indian newspapers and television could talk of nothing else. There were lists in the papers of Indians who had contributed large sums of money. There were stories of miraculous escapes, but more stories of unimaginable destruction. It got so that I could not look at the news for more than a few minutes at a time. The worst damage to India seems to have been in the low-lying Andaman and Nicobar Islands. There were some fishing villages near Pondicherry and Chennai that were almost wiped up. India was trying to get the fishermen's boats repaired and back in the water.

As you have read we really weren't affected by it. We did cancel our plans to go to Sri Lanka even though we were told we could go, but it didn't feel right. We went to Pondicherry and Chennai, even though most tourists had cancelled for fear of disease or polluted drinking water. India handled the problem very well and as far as I know there were no outbreaks of cholera. I always drink bottled water when I travel.

I'm so glad we persisted in our tour for South India is wonderful. It is my fourth trip to the country and the first where I really fell in love with it. South India does not have the poverty you see in the north. Everywhere we went we saw colleges and universities being built for education is a main priority for India young. India is on its way to be an economic force in the world.

Life is not a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming – Wow what a ride!