

SOUTH INDIA JOURNAL

**By
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**India Bound
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There is an Indian saying that you can never visit India just once. I didn't believe it in 1972 when after two months, I couldn't wait to get out. But by three weeks later (somewhere in Afghanistan or Iran) I was already plotting a way to return. So I returned in 1977 with Kathy for our honeymoon, then the two of us plotted again and returned in 1980 on our way home from the Peace Corps in Malaysia.

So here we are, leaving in just an hour for our 30th wedding anniversary trip to India, this time to the south, where I hadn't been since 1972 and where Kathy has never been. We don't know what to expect, except a lot of change and more people. And probably a better time because we are more mature and won't be traveling 3rd class.

So, when convenient, we'll keep you posted. Best wishes for a good November.

**We're Here!
Thursday, November 8, Bangalore, India**

We were awakened today at 6:00 by two loud explosions. Turned out to be the opening salvo of Diwali, the Hindu Festival of lights. Kind of like Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter and 4th of July all in one. And to top it off, it's India vs. Pakistan in cricket today, which is their passionate version of the World Series.

We arrived in Bangalore at 1:30 a.m. after 26 hours of travel. The moment we stepped off the plane we knew we were in India. You cannot mistake it in the dark for anywhere else in the world with its sights, sounds, grime, colors, garbage, crush of humanity, and above all, smells--both delightful and bad. After leaving the airport area the only stirring creatures were the feral street dogs moving in the shadows scavenging garbage.

Our hotel is new and very nice, and only \$50, including a very good Indian breakfast. Only problem is that it is located in the heart of the automotive and motorcycle supply part of town. Blocks and blocks of tiny used tire shops, detail shops, tools, etc. It's not the Bangalore of Thomas Freidmans "The World is Flat," but you can see it from here. The traffic, noise, and pollution are hard to imagine. It's not the Bangalore I remembered from 1972.

After a couple of hours of sleep we hired a scooter cab for the day (about \$10 US) and saw the official tourist sights, got Sim cards for our phones (\$10 to call anywhere in the world for the next 3 weeks), go to the ATM, the botanical gardens, have lunch with Kay Gage's delightful friend, Poona, then we walked among the colorful streets lined with fabric and clothing stores bustling with busy Diwali shoppers. We finished the night off with our third Indian meal of the day, served on a banana leaf for 50 cents. We've been in heaven with the food here so far. Guess it's a fair trade off for the hard-to-find bad coffee.

The traffic is relatively light today. Our driver drove us all over this city of 5-7 million people, artfully dodging bicycles, motor cycles, busses, trucks, pedestrians, bullock carts, and countless scooter cabs belching noise and exhaust like poorly tuned two-stroke lawn mowers.

The cricket game starts in an hour, so he's anxious to get us back. We're anxious to get out of this big polluted city. Tomorrow we leave by train to the SE coast toward Chennai, and ultimately ending up in the French-inspired Pondichery (from "Life of Pi" fame). We're really looking forward to the countryside and to getting into a more rural setting.

Anyway, so far this is kind of how we imagined it would be. And we're really enjoying ourselves and the people we've encountered. More later.

Cricket, Pink Floyd, Fireworks, Trains and Trash

Saturday, November 10, 2007

Mammalapurham, SE India

Before I die, I would like to master one of life's great mysteries—the rules of cricket. After our last dispatch, lunch and a little shopping in the glitzy area of Bangalore, we decided to get some relatively fresh air in a smoke-filled bar and watch the India-Pakistan Cricket match. Sportscasters everywhere over analyze and explain things to death so I figured this would be a good shortcut, as well as a way to observe the groovy high-tech and call center employees coming off duty dressed in fashionable western clothing. Two beers later, we left even more confused. Ear-splitting Pink Floyd music and entertaining commercials for cell phones and computers drowned out any esoteric analysis of cricket. At this rate, I'll need to live almost forever before I can put the cricket notch on my belt.

That evening we climbed to the open-air restaurant-bar at the top of our 7-story hotel—the tallest building in over a mile. We were treated to gigantic professional fireworks displays in all directions, plus a lot of amateur ones on the streets below. Accompanied by spicy north-Indian kabobs and curry, it will be a night we'll always remember.

Friday morning we left Bangalore at 6:00 by train—on time. What a pleasant surprise since our last Indian train ride in 1980! The train station was clean, orderly, and not very crowded—yet. We found our names posted on our coach on Indian Railways stationery sponsored by “Instant Fairness,” a skin whitening cream. (At first I thought it was some new slogan or a long-overdue policy by the railroad.) This was our first time ever in air conditioned first class—and it was better than Damtrack in the States. There's even a cell phone and computer charging station on the car! Unlike the 2nd class coaches bulging at the seams with humanity, our coach was only 1/3 full. Tea and breakfast were served as the other occupants fiddled with their cell phones and worked on English alphabet drills with their young children. While it was very comfortable and pleasant, we missed the interaction we would have had three coaches back.

We descended over the next 5 hours from the cool 3,000 feet of Bangalore into the steamy sauna of Chennai (formerly Madras). But at least the air quality and traffic were better. The rural scenery was a real rest on the eyes and lungs after the stress of Bangalore. It was the 2nd day of a religious holiday, so people were decorating and making offerings at countryside shrines, playing cricket with sticks, riding to visit relatives, sometimes a family of four on one motorcycle.

Just like many other places there is a huge divide between the urban and rural worlds. As always in India the crushing poverty is ever present and incomprehensible. After awhile, one become numbed by it. But what really stands out this time is the burgeoning middle class, and from what I've read, probably the largest in the world. India seems much more prosperous than before, at least for the middle class.

We arrived in Chennai early and that train station was also a pleasant surprise, although it was mobbed. We found our driver who took us to our hotel about two hours south, stopping at a couple of artist colonies along the way. We're staying at a place with a real original name: The Ideal Beach Resort. But it truly lives up to its name and is equal in everything but price to any resort we have stayed in Hawaii. The ambiance, the food, and above all, the people here are wonderful—and all for only \$100 per night.

Today we hired a guide (a venerated 66-year old Swami) and a car to take us into town to tour the massive bas-relief stone carvings dating back to the 6th Century AD. I remembered them well from 1972, but the town seems so much bigger and filthier than I had remembered. But the unique smells of incense, curry, garbage, bidi cigarettes, and urine weaving among the sounds of melodic religious music are the same. So are the ancient busses and the swarms of aggressive trinket hawkers. The ubiquitous cell phone and DVD shops are new. And many more cars and motorcycles clog the roads.

Some things are better. Instead of taking an hour to change money at a bank, it only takes a minute at an ATM. And clean bottled water and international pay phones are readily available everywhere. All of this new prosperity has created a new problem—litter. When we were last here, chai tea was served in terra-cotta cups. Food was served on banana leaves and wrapped in biodegradable newspaper. Now there are mountains of plastic everywhere. Indians are fastidious about personal hygiene, but it seems to stop at their front doors. They think nothing of throwing garbage on the grounds of a religious shine.

Because of logistics and inertia, one of the key rules of travel in India is that upon arriving in a town one must plan an exit strategy as soon as possible. We could end up spending the rest of our trip here at Ideal Beach. So we hired a car and driver for the next 11 days—it comes to about \$65 per day. The trains don't go everywhere we want to go and we're not about to ride in non air-conditioned 30-passenger busses crammed with 75 people. Plus we're not 28 and broke anymore. Money may not buy happiness and it may make your life more complex, but no matter where you live, money makes life easier!

Well this was way too long. I promise the others will be shorter, especially as the novelty fades. We're off to the beach!

French Curry Pondichery, Monday, November 12

We are in a delightful place called Pondichery on the SE coast of India. Until 50 years ago it was some sort of a French colony. So the French part of town has nice tree-lined and clean streets with big French colonial mansions with beautiful courtyards & open air living rooms. In fact, we staying in one that was converted to a B&B. It even has “French” restaurants, but after trying one, we're going back to cheap Indian food tonight. Even though this part of the town has a French ambience, it is still inescapably India.

Yesterday, Bamma, our Samurai driver took us two hours inland to Kanchipurham, an ancient Hindu capital with massive stone temples spread out all over town. The place was hot and chaotic, mobbed with Indian tourists, vehicles with blaring horns, and aggressive hawkers. The 6th Century temples were a site to behold and marvel, but now we've been there and done that. Part of our two-hour drive to Pondicherry was on the new national highway, kind of like our Interstate. The good news was that we didn't have to

worry so much about head-on collisions as we do elsewhere. But on the other hand, Brama had to contend with a variety of vehicles of all descriptions and all speeds. Size one's vehicle and the decibel level of one's horn, plus well measured flashes of the brights determine who has the right of way, and even then it is with centimeters to spare. The highway suddenly ended and we descended into our definition of hell—a large bus and taxi stand in the middle of a muddy, filthy shantytown.

Eventually we made it to Pondichery and spent a delightful afternoon on the boardwalk and sitting outside a bakery drinking tea watching half of Pondichery promenading in their Sunday finest to the sea shore, stopping for sweets, ice cream, and enjoying the nighttime market. Talk about bright and beautiful colors! Not all were on foot—many were on motorcycles and bikes—whole families frequently. And what is so refreshing to see—besides the joy and laughter often missing—were women in saris and baseball caps driving motorcycles and scooters—some with the husband or boyfriend on back! And couples hold hands in public, too.

The highlight of our day was attending a Rotary club meeting at a fancy hotel, about a mile from our guest house. They told us to be there at 9:00 p.m., but obviously the meeting had started much earlier. When we arrived they greeted each of us with a standing ovation and a bouquet of flowers. After the obligatory photos and an exchange of our club's banner, one of them proudly told us all about their club, district and service projects, and then I did the same for them. During Q&A they really wanted to know what brought us here to Pondichery, as they seldom—if ever—get any western visitors. Then the beer, wine, whiskey and toasts followed with a very savory and spicy buffet. I guess we were the official program & entertainment for the evening. It will remain a very special highlight of our trip, and a night we will treasure for years to come. We walked home late at night among souls sleeping in the shadows, and we felt very safe. Don't think we could say that in the States!

Organized Chaos
Thanjavur, SE India
November 14, 2007

Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the mid-day sun, as the saying goes. So we've retreated to our air-conditioned accommodations at the beautiful Ideal River Resort near Thanjavur in SE India. It is set among rice paddies and jungle on the banks of a river about the width of the Willamette at Salem. It is so fragrant, quiet and mellow. Earlier in the day we visited yet another huge temple and palace, then went shopping for some native garb. We were waited upon by the usual bevy of underemployed clerks with an entourage of on-lookers. A tailor is quickly making something up for Kathy, which we'll pick up this evening. We had a very tasty and filling lunch for 50 cents each at a "meals hotel" on a dusty and noisy street. We were the only westerners there. A mound of rice on a banana leaf with several different vegetarian curries, a yogurt, and a soup. You eat it entirely with your right hand. Going back to a knife and fork will be like making love through an interpreter.

While waiting for Brama, our driver, we had a fun time standing on a very busy and noisy corner by the bus station watching the world go by. The noise is deafening and it is a sort of an organized chaos. There must be rules--we just don't know what they are. As the late John Kenneth Galbraith (the economist and former ambassador to India during the Kennedy Administration) said, "**India is a functioning anarchy.**" At a temple earlier today we met a retired India couple that had been to the States. The very first observation he made was how we follow the rules, even when no one is looking.

Yesterday we drove for a long time from Pondicherry to three different towns and saw several different temples. They were nothing short of amazing! Each one was better than the last. And we can say that about our trip--each day is better than before. We're seeing an India we never saw before from the train or on night busses. We bought a couple of CDs--Bollywood and upbeat Indian classical. Brama bought jasmine lei to hang from the rear view mirror. So with him artfully dodging bullock carts, bikes, busses, goats, cows, trucks, dogs, people and motorcycles, we sit in the back seat of the small Tata air-conditioned sedan enjoying the music, jasmine, and try to process it all. Life is good, at least for us. I can't say that for many of those we see along the way.

No More Temples
Thekaddy, Kerala, South Central India
November 16, 2007

It is 7:45 p.m. and we are in a post office that hasn't had a coat of paint since the British left. But we have one of the fastest Internet connections ever. They are trying to compete with all the other Internet cafes around, and they are succeeding at it—mainly because they don't have AC (alternating current, as in off and on). Many shops throughout India have portable generators out front, as power outages are quite common. The cyber cafes often have a bank of 5-10 old car batteries to help minimize dropped connections throughout the day.

Yesterday we had a four-hour drive to Madurai, a huge and bustling city with a gigantic temple that was built off and on over the last 1000 years. It was so huge, it had a mini city in it, and we would have been lost without a guide. Over 10,000 people—almost all Indian tourists and pilgrims visit it daily. We even photographed a wedding with the groom talking on his cell phone during the procession. And although Indians are generally very prudish or modest in dress, and they rarely kiss in movies, some of the sculptures are downright explicit and pornographic. Afterward we spent a fun 2 hours enjoying the active nightlife when everyone comes out to shop. We finally finished off the day on a roof top restaurant with one of the best tandoor chicken dishes ever, washed down with a bottle of Kingfisher beer.

And it's a good thing we had some beer. Our hotel cost only \$15 US, but the bed was rock hard and we had to share the noisy and non-air-conditioned room with the cockroaches.

Today was the most beautiful drive so far through lush green rice paddies and areas where the padi was being harvested. That transitioned into palms and now we are up in a very cool hill station called Thekaddy, near a wildlife preserve. Actually, the town is a dump and a tourist trap. We're staying in a guesthouse for \$25, but it is a little primitive. The owner promised to turn on the hot water heater while we are at this post office. But on the plus side, it's nice and cool, and we toured an interesting spice garden and tomorrow we hope to go on a wildlife viewing boat trip on the lake at 5:30 a.m. Then on to Cochin, on the West Coast. And no more temples for a while!

Bakseesh, Tigers, Christians, and Jews, Oh My!
Fort Cochin, Kerala, SW India
November 18, 2007

Most travelers to India eventually condition themselves to see through the dirt, poverty, traffic, and crush of humanity to see the rich texture of sights, sounds, smells, flavors, brilliant colors, and the friendliness

of the Indian people. But one thing in our Western DNA that irritates like a sharp pebble stuck in a sandal is corruption, or baksheesh, as it is known. We arose at 5:00 a.m. yesterday to get into line (they call it a queue here) to the wildlife preserve and paid RS 600 (about \$15) to get admission to the park. Then a mad one meter dash by car, gigantic tourist bus, or taxi to stand in line for the boat to go out on the lake to observe tigers, elephants and other wildlife as they come for early morning water. The tickets for the 100-passenger boat sold out in a matter of minutes even before the first 25 people in line could get them. Turns out the State Forestry employees steal them and sell them to the large tour operators at highly marked up prices on the black market. You can't go anywhere in the park unless by boat or an all-day guided trek. Pretty good system they've got going, but it least it keeps people from trashing the place up like they did the waiting area.

So we left the hill station without seeing any tigers and descended down to the SE coastline, stopping a tea plantation along the way. The drive was beautiful. But imagine going up and down the Mackenzie pass 10 times, contending with large trucks and busses on blind curves and dodging axle-breaking potholes for four hours.

Somehow, I don't think we're in Tamil Nadu, Toto. Kerala is very different and beautiful. The people are very friendly and conversant in English. The food is different, and the place is relatively clean, too. And everywhere you look, you see communist party signs and the hammer and cycle symbol. The proprietor of our 15th Century Portuguese mansion converted into a comfortable guest house said they have no socialist agenda, and apparently never got the memo about the collapse of the Soviet Union. He said they are just as corrupt as everyone else. One book we have just read estimates that 30-40% of all government contracts goes to baksheesh. And that probably explains a lot of the dilapidated or poorly constructed buildings. The maintenance money just gets bled off.

Bramma dropped us off in the middle of nowhere yesterday at a water ferry stop. Then he drove on in to Fort Cochin to meet us at the other end. It was much like the Venice vaporetto (water bus), only more dilapidated, slower, and relaxing--especially after that long drive. For only 12 cents each we zigzagged across canals and bodies of water and got to see the local color for over two hours. Every now and then we passed one of those gigantic houseboats that charge hundreds of dollars per day. The route among the rice paddies and palm trees was dotted with many Christian churches and private schools. The Christian shrines resemble the Hindu shrines in many aspects, only the figurines in them are much more human looking. Our proprietor is Christian, with a shrine off the common area. His morning worship was very similar to what we saw the Hindus do, but to different deities.

Today we walked about two miles to what is called "Jew Town," with a synagogue built in the 1500s. Unfortunately it was closed, but it looked beautiful. This town is a bustling seaport and it is fun to watch the fishermen hawk their fish along the shore. You buy one, and then take it to a restaurant—kind of a BYOF. They have the big nets out on booms, introduced by the Chinese centuries ago. Tomorrow we'll try to get tickets for the narrow gauge train to another hill station called Ooty, but the prospects don't look good. Either way, Bramma will take us on to Mysore, where we have elected to spend an extra day instead of at Ooty. We don't do well in tourist towns.

Car Free
Mysore, South Central India
Wednesday evening Wednesday, November 21

It's good to be done with the car, but we already miss our new best friend, Bramma. He was able to give us some basic insights into India, and the car gave us a lot of freedom and convenience. It eliminated

almost all stress upon arrival and departure from any city, with spontaneous detours and stopping for photos along the way. But we traded that stress reduction and freedom for the stress of being in a small car in tortuous traffic on windy narrow roads. Monday was a seven-hour drive from the seaport of Kerala to Mettapallaym, and I was a little queasy. Nice friendly town. Everybody wanted to practice their English on us. But after an hour of wandering the streets we retired to our \$30 room (that smelled of insect killer) and channel surfed from one Indian MTV copy-cat to another, to the Indian CNN, to the Indian version of Survivor, and with lots of Bollywood movies of all vintages in-between. .

Yesterday (Tuesday) we lucked out and got tickets on the narrow gauge steam train that went from about 500' elevation to the 7800' high hill station of Ooty. The views were stunning as we left the steamy plains and ascended through fragrant tea plantations and forests of bamboo, rhododendron, and eucalyptus. Our coach had about 20 young male college students on a field trip, so that added a lot of fun and local color as they sang songs and screamed as we went through the 27 tunnels. It felt so good to be off of a road for a change! Bamma met us at Ooty 4 1/2 hours later in a thick and cold mist. We're glad we elected not to stay there--it appeared to be just another tourist town. The drive down to Mysore included 36 one-lane hairpin turns (the warning signs count them for you) through a national park. We were thrilled to come upon a small herd of elephants crossing the road right in front of us! Later we saw wild boor, lots of deer, monkeys, and Bamma even spotted a huge scorpion on the road.

Even though he had been driving for nearly 8 intense hours, Bamma insisted on taking us to one more temple outside of Mysore because it would be too difficult or expensive to do on our own later. We bought him a flower lei for good luck on his 12-hour journey home and gave him a huge tip of \$50 (about 4X what an Indian tourist would pay him and basically one-half month's salary). By the way, he considers himself middle class.

Of all the cities I have been to in my four trips to India, Mysore is one of the best. It's cooler, easy to walk around, the traffic is more orderly, the people are very friendly, and we can understand their English. We've been conditioned in our other travels to avoid the police in Asia (except in Singapore). But here, a cop even stopped traffic and escorted us through a very busy traffic circle! (NO vehicle ever stops for a pedestrian!) We spent a fun day shopping--this is quite the silk capital. We happened upon a highly educated owner of a silk shop who entertained us with a lot Indian jokes and commentary on politics and culture. The flower market, the incense market, and the vegetable market were also unexpected delights, as was a crowded "banana leaf" restaurant with us as the only Westerners. And we met our 3rd American of the entire trip today.

Tomorrow we'll go through the Royal Palace, and then catch an afternoon train to Bangalore (ugh!), then an overnight sleeper train to Hampi, way north. This trip has made us extremely aware of how absolutely great we have it and it has filled us with extreme gratitude for our countless blessings. We wish you all the best for a happy and gratitude-filled Thanksgiving.

The Best For Last
Hampi--North of Bangalore
Sunday, November 25

I've seen some pretty amazing places in my 50+ years, but where we are now ranks right up there with the Taj Mahal, the Temples of Pagan in Burma, the (former) Buddha statues in Afghanistan, and the Thangbochi Monastery at the base of Mt. Everest. We were getting tired of India and felt like going

home after arriving back in Bangalore, but clearly, that would have been a huge mistake and an unknown regret.

After touring the Royal Palace in Mysore (definitely over the top!) on Thanksgiving morning, we took a very relaxing and high-speed train to Bangalore (Cough, Cough!) Had a Thanksgiving dinner of tandoor chicken and lentils on a roof top restaurant, then caught the overnight train to Hampi. The trains are the way to go, especially 1st class. For \$37, we got good clean "room" on wheels with 4 others with clean sheets and a blanket, arriving refreshed early in the morning in Hampi.

This is billed as the world's largest living world heritage site. Between 1000 and 1525, Hampi was one of the largest and richest city-states in the world, larger than Rome at the time. It had a water and sewer system. It's about 25 square miles of ruins in the middle of nowhere with abandoned temples and city dwellings in a lush valley surrounded by massive house-sized boulders, a little bit like Sedona AZ. Archeologists were at work at several of the sites we visited, and some of the most impressive things were only excavated within the past 15-20 years.

We rented a couple of dilapidated bikes that weighed more than an Abrams tank and have spent two delightful and mellow days riding from ruin to ruin, stopping to hike along the way or go to the local bazaar for chapattis and dal. There are a lot of young world travelers here, so the place is pretty clean with plenty of cheap accommodations and eateries, not to mention Internet shops. Many of them are in old ruins--including the bank where we changed money. Riding home on Friday, the full moon was rising among the temples and boulders on our left, as the orange sun was setting among the palm trees and sugar cane fields on the right, with the tranquil sound of cowbells as we passed the bullock carts. Truly sublime!

We're staying in a government-run hotel about 3 miles from Hampi. Although it's clean, it's definitely a government-run place. A banana grove adjoins it, but it was impossible to get any bananas or fruit for breakfast because the army of under-employed wait staff said it wasn't their job to cross the street and buy some. Besides, they needed a purchase order. And unlike every other place, Visa wasn't accepted. So we had an interesting and time-consuming experience changing travelers checks at the Hampi bank. Lots of forms in triplicate, passports produced; several ceremonious chops of rubber stamps, a token to go to one window, then yet another. They had ancient computer terminals, but duplicated everything in massive hand-written ledger books. We finally emerged 30 minutes later, loaded down with 100 and 10 Rupee notes, instead of convenient 500 notes. By contrast, the ATMs take about one minute. (And by the way, they are safer than those in Europe because the machine doesn't keep your card during the transaction).

This evening we leave for Bangalore on the night train. A day of shopping, noise and smog, then we catch a 3:30 AM plane the 28th, arriving in Portland around noon the same day. Meanwhile, we're just hanging out in Hampi Bazaar this afternoon, savoring the pleasantness of the Indian countryside, enjoying a spicy lunch overlooking the river and boulders.

I got a haircut today in a stall as the cows and pigs paraded by. It cost only \$1 (which is about 60 cents too much), and they had no electric trimmers. It was quite the spectator event in the small village by our hotel.

It's been a great trip, but India is a package deal. One must take the good (and there is a lot of it) with the bad and deal with the bad with a sense of detachment. Without it, one would go insane. The very wealthy Indians can purchase a nice air-conditioned home, send their kids to private schools, hire servants, and ride in a chauffeured car. But as they leave their gated compounds into a world where zoning is an alien concept, they must immediately deal with squatters, beggars, perhaps a small foundry

or auto repair shop, a noisy bus stand, or a dump right outside. They still must venture into the real India with its noise, garbage, traffic, air pollution, poverty, corruption and unbelievable waves of humanity. It's a great place to visit, but we don't want to live here. At least we have the option of returning to our own country, with its own set of problems that seem trivial by comparison

Homeward Bound!

Bangalore, Tuesday November 27, 4:00 p.m.

We leave our hotel tonight at 11:30 to go to the airport for the 3 hour wait before our 3:30 a.m. flight from Bangalore for Frankfurt, then to Portland. From what we saw upon arrival three weeks ago, I'm sure the comfort and amenities won't be nearly as nice as the Bangalore train station!

So, I'm killing time in a cyber cafe with 18 computers in a stuffy room that is 10 feet wide by 20 feet long, 3 stories up, the only Westerner. Cost is 25 cents per hour. Bangalore has been very nice this time. Good weather, conveniently located hotel, and nice air quality. Did a lot of shopping and walking, and of course, eating. On average, we have spent between \$5 and \$10 per day for food, eating extremely well. Except for one minor stomach upset I had in Fort Cochin, we haven't had the slightest health problem. We've inadvertently drunk tap water a few times with no problems. Our typical rooms averaged about \$50 per night. We just had a 10-cent cup of coffee in a Gandhi-era coffee house. Our big culture shock coming home will be how expensive everything is. Starbucks for 120 rupees!

The three weeks were just the right amount of time. They have seemed like both three days and three months. We never got tired of each other's company 24/7. We have grown quite accustomed to the way things work (and don't work) here, and we're not overly anxious to get home to the cold and grey, and all the Christmas hype. But a good glass of red wine, safely crossing a street, the quiet, and sleeping in a soft bed without earplugs will be nice.

We've experienced countless sights, sounds, colors, smells, flavors, and slices of life that will stick with us forever. But what we will miss the most and remember fondly are all the interesting and friendly people we have met. We've had some fascinating conversations and dealings with people from all walks of life. And looking back, some of our best encounters and transactions have been with the Muslims.

South India was a treasure and a wonderful experience. We will return someday, hopefully soon.

Ron