

Letter #6 - Kerala

or Farewell and Namaste

We have left the red dust behind and entered the land of red tiled roofs and green. Lush tropical greenery, fertile red soil and welcoming warmth, both climate and people. It is a land of near 100% literacy, scores of daily newspapers, no smoking, trash collection and civic pride. The state of Kerala is known both for its communists—fairly progressive from what I've seen—and Christians, a huge population stemming from the first century AD visit of St. Thomas. Crosses dot the landscape, along with banana and coconut palms. And ports, beaches, canals and backwaters, in which seawater and mountain rivers mingle.

The rivers originate in Kerala's misty hill country, which we set off at once to explore. Up a long narrow road our fearless young driver Arun climbs the forested slopes to Munnar, so high it is above the tree line. We can only celebrate our survival as this is a popular destination and we share the way with careening buses, trucks and tuk-tuks. To those of the crowded, dusty plains, this cool calm region holds great mystique and honeymooners throng here with their henna-stained arms, smiles and blue jeans.

Sinuuous lines of tea plantations sculpt the hillsides and Aryurvedic herb gardens. Coffee is also cultivated here and spices. On the well-muscled back of a patient elephant, we ride through a jungle of pungent black peppercorns, green-turning-red-berried coffee trees, palms, creepers and filmy webs monitored by great spiders.

Then we return to Kochi—old Cochin—on India's west coast, traditionally open to the world. Early visitors to the Malabar Coast were Jewish traders of spices and silks, many of whom settled here in an ancient kingdom that flourished until sacked by the Portuguese and

Moors around the 16C. The leader of the community swam, wife on his shoulders, to Cochin where the Hindu raja granted them protection. Sharing a palace wall, the ancient synagogue is now but a moving memorial to the past as Indian and foreign tourists move barefoot over hand-painted blue Chinese tiles while the Jews of Cochin have moved on.

Emblematic of the local harmony, Muslims look after the synagogue and repair old gravestones. As Christians string stars for Christmas, Hindus gods are honored and airports

have a Muslim prayer room. Maybe it's the fertile soil, but Kerala does seem a land of ease and plenty, space for all. As they call it, God's Own Country.

Since this is our last stop in India, I can not help but reflect on this visit, my first in 18 years. Then airports were dark and grim, offi-



Old Chinese fishing nets, Cochin harbor



Old Synagogue, Cochin

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cials dour, paperwork conducted with carbon paper. There is still the carbon paper on occasion and ledger books and I still feared the scowling Kolkata immigration official, but overall India is a much more open place, connected to the world community as well as her ancient traditions. This is, after all, the culture that gave us the concept of zero, the Taj Mahal, Pandit Ravi Shankar (who died the final day of our visit), Buddha and yoga.



Munnar Hill Station and Tea Plantation

The vast gap between rich and poor still exists in all its heartbreak, but the middle class is thriving, vibrant and sophisticated. They dress in blue jeans and black veils, orange saris and timeless tunics and leggings. They no longer bow before power and recently sprang into action to defend a Mumbai girl arrested over a Facebook update taken to criticize a deceased political boss. Mockery is their weapon of choice and the Internet their vehicle.

Openness begets openness. Everywhere Indian tourists are exploring their heritage, climbing stone steps to ancient holy caves, visiting Rajasthani forts, Kerala hill stations—and of course the Taj. Rich or poor, Indians are on the move, in bullock carts, cars and buses, motorcycles, trucks and trains...talking, texting and taking tea.

They are generous hosts, pleased to share their country with us. Hands folded in namaskar, they greet us with namaste, a word—like shalom and salaam—that means both hello and farewell.

Namaste my beloved India. See you next time.



Aleppy Backwaters



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