

WHY GOING TO SOUTH INDIA IS BETTER THAN A TRIP TO FLORIDA MEL BORINS M.D.

Kerala has a great climate, a long shoreline with serene beaches, tropical fresh water rivers and streams, lush hill stations and exotic wildlife, sprawling plantations and lime green rice paddy fields, historical monuments, cultural activities and most of all friendly smiling welcoming people. Guaranteed weather and cheap prices once you get there makes this a much better destination than Miami.

Our tour filled with fascinating sights, a diversity of cultural experiences and much appreciated opportunities for rest and relaxation considering we were only staying for six nights.

Kerala is interesting because of the mix of Hindus, Moslems and Christians. There are churches, mosques and Hindu temples of every shape and size everywhere you look and the Portuguese influence is quite visible just like we observed years before in Goa.

What especially stood out for me was that wherever we went the Indian people smiled warmly and said hello or Namaste. But when we passed another Westener, whether at the hotel, on the street or at a tourist site they diverted their eyes, looked down and never offered a greeting just like back home in Toronto. The infectious friendliness of the Indian people did not seem to rub off on the foreign visitors.

CITY OF COCHIN

For our first two nights we stayed at the elegant Ramada Resort in Cochin. The resort has a huge meandering swimming pool and luxurious rooms with all the comforts of home. Our spacious room overlooked the Arabian Sea and the large breakfast was as good as anywhere in the world. It was a peaceful haven to retreat to at the end of a busy day of touring.

We boarded a large boat, the St. Sebastian, at the Fort Cochin Ferry dock for our private tour of the harbour. We saw the city landscape, the famous Chinese fishing nets, ship building and repair facilities and the gigantic loading docks with containers from all over the world. The best part of the boat ride was to see dolphins swimming and frolicking beside our boat.

We visited the impressive St. Francis Church which was originally built in 1503 and is the oldest European church in India. Vasco da Gama who discovered the sea route from Europe to India, was initially buried in this church. Nearby is the imposing Santa Cruz Basilica built in 1505,

destroyed by the British in 1795 and later rebuilt in 1887. The Christians of Kerala which make up about 16% of the population belong to one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. St. Thomas apparently came to Kerala in 52 AD and converted his followers at that time.

After a delicious sea food lunch at the renowned Malabar House Restaurant we visited Jew Town to see the oldest synagogue in the Commonwealth. The first Jewish traders apparently came to Kerala back in 992 BC during the time of King Solomon. After the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD some Jews fled to India and settled in Cranganore and other parts of India. Other Jews came to India in 490 AD from Persia and Babylon and in 1492 after their expulsion from Spain. The Maharajahs of Cochin welcomed the Jews and the Pardesi Synagogue was built in 1568. Kerala has been a place of tolerance and acceptance.

We walked down the narrow streets of the old city of Cochin to Jew Street. We took off our shoes at the entrance of the Synagogue which is the custom in India for visiting homes and other places of worship. The synagogue floor is made of individually painted tiles from China. There are large crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling and the Ark and holy bibles are hidden by a silk curtain. There is an informative pictorial description of the history of the Jews of Kerala in one of the outer rooms.

Perhaps the most impressive quality of Kerala is its openness to external influences. Diversity is part of everyday life. Arab, Roman, Chinese, Islamist, Christian, Marxist and British have all left their mark on Kerala. Kerala was the first place on earth to democratically elect a communist government, vote the communists out and re-elect them back again. Kerala has the highest literacy rate in all of India and primary school is compulsory for all children.

BACKWATERS

We drove 65km south of Cochin to Alleppey, an area of many inland canals and waterways called the “Backwaters”, famous for its floating houseboats. We checked into the Punnamada Spa Resort and then boarded our luxury houseboat docked directly in front of our waterfront room. We traveled all day on a converted rice barge that was used in the early days for the transport of goods from the isolated interior villages to the towns. These large house boats, about 67 feet long and 13 feet wide, have fully furnished single and double bedrooms with on-suite washrooms, sundeck, private balcony with comfortable chairs and full kitchen.

A cruise on a houseboat is a fabulous way to explore the picturesque beauty of the backwaters and a wonderful way to witness the simple life of Keralites who live on the river and canals. Many tourists choose to sleep on the elegant houseboats and have all meals prepared from local fresh provisions that is plucked, caught or bought in the back water.

We awoke to the tunes of lovely birds and watched an amazing sunrise through the coconut palms. Then we drove to the Abad Whispering Palms resort, located at Kumarakom, a tiny settlement on lovely Vembanad Lake, one of the largest lakes in India. We took another riverboat cruise through Mangrove forests, emerald green paddy fields and coconut groves interspersed with enchanting waterways and canals adorned with white lilies and a plethora of birds. The staff at the resort went out of their way to make us feel at home.

The most impressive thing about India, unlike Florida, is the unexpected. While driving south to beaches of Kovalam our driver had to stop because of religious Hindu procession. We jumped out to see many slender young men in trance with ten foot long steel rods piercing through their cheeks walking towards the temple. Teenage boys also in trance were dancing, eyes closed, to the rhythm of temple drums. Men with huge colourful four feet tall headdresses precariously balanced on their heads were followed by a procession of flutes. You'd never see that in Miami.

The 1.2 billion inhabitants of India face so many challenges. The greatness of a people is measured by how they cope with adversity. Although there is a wealthy minority and a growing middle class the great majority of Indians live without sanitation in very poor living conditions. We were inspired by the tenacity, good will and generosity of the Indian people in general. Perhaps the most profound reason to visit India is to remind us just how fortunate we are living in North America with our health and sanitation systems in place. India is all about acceptance and surrender. Once again we were reminded that joy and inner peace is not just about wealth and possessions.

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