

Trip Review



Chinese fishing nets at Cochi, Malabar Pied Hornbill in Dandelli, face of a Kathakali dancer.

South India

Exploring Kerala, Karnataka and Goa

By Will Weber, JOURNEYS Director

South India is a great winter destination for sunny weather, warm hospitality and a delightful taste of Indian culture, nature and cuisine. Here are some impressions from a January-February 2010 trip I made with four JOURNEYS clients and our naturalist guide, Avi Sakhrel.

Starting at the southern tip in the state of Kerala

The more trips I make to India, the more I realize I have yet to learn, experience and understand about the world's second most populous nation. Our trip began in Trivandrum, continued to the southernmost tip of India at Kanyakumari and then wove a route by van, boat and train to Goa via Kochi (Cochin).

Kerala has the highest literacy level in India. It also has an elected communist state government and a very well maintained system of roads, parks and public transportation. This the ayurvedic health and healing center of India. Often combined



with yoga, meditation and homeopathic methods, the ayurvedic system is aligned with Hindu beliefs and seeks to prolong life by addressing stress and balances in body. Most local hotels and lodges offer ayurvedic massage and morning hatha yoga as part of their services.



I loved the food. The larger lodges and resorts offer both Western and Indian cuisine buffets, but I found that *iddly* (rice dumpling) and *dossa* (rice flour crepe) served with a *sambar* curry made a great breakfast. Shrimp, prawn, fish, other sea foods and good tea and coffee were always on the menu.

Coconut trees were part of the landscape whenever we were near the coast. Huge coconut plantations dominate the agriculture in many areas. We learned that with the economic progress of these areas and with many people seeking employment in the cities the landscapes of palm plantations and rice fields as fewer people seek the low paid and often difficult jobs traditional agriculture provides.

An Elephant Festival

The trip was timed to visit the local Gajamela Festival at ancient Parthasarathy Temple. The event was spectacularly colorful and dramatic with troops of drummers, floats, men in make-up and costumes representing tigers, leopards and panthers. Two dozen parading, caparisoned elephants competed for prizes as most magnificent animal. Thousands of local people participated in the events while just a few of us foreigners marveled at the color, volume and intensity of the celebration.



Traveling by houseboat

Kerala is known for coastal lagoons. We traveled through some of the lagoons in our luxuriously-appointed bamboo thatched houseboat to appreciate the life on the backwaters. Watching palm-framed sunset and sunrise from the comfort of the houseboat deck we felt a timeless connection with thousands of years of history in the area. We stopped at several palaces of maharajah dynasties and noted that the palace architecture offering airy, elevated walkways and balconies still features in local design.

We spent a very comfortable night on a houseboat cruising the lagoons near Alleppey, We watched the sunset and sunrise while anchored in the middle of a shallow lagoon as terns and herons flew to and from their roosts. It was nice to be of the highways for a while. The houseboat took us to our accommodations at Coconut Lagoon Lodge where we explored the waterways by small boat for a sense of life on the lagoons.





Cruising Kochi

Kochi is a beautiful port city with a colorful colonial and pre-colonial legacy. We took morning sunset boat trips around the harbor and observed the famous Chinese fishing nets in action.



We traveled by overnight train and early morning coach transfer to Dandeli Sanctuary in Karnataka State. Trains in India are very popular ways to travel and generally quite reliable. Booked in Second Class



Aboard the overnight train

Sleeper cars, we were comfortable and uncrowded. It helped to have Avi alerting us to our station and helping us plan for the process of boarding and disembarking the train. It helps not to have too much luggage. We were all able to handle our own gear. Porters are sometimes available to help, but not always. On the train we had plenty to eat from our carry-on lunches, but there was also food and beverage sold by vendors who worked the aisles. The train was clean, relatively quiet and odorless.

Dandeli Wildlife Sanctuary

Situated at about 4,000 feet elevation in the Western Ghat Range, this park offered us a chance to hike in search of wildlife. While we saw signs of tiger, our best large mammal sighting was a herd of Gaur or Indian Bison. Bonnet Macaques and Black-faced Langurs were abundant. Everywhere we saw Malabar Giant Squirrels feeding on bamboo seeds. We also visited a crocodile-clogged river. We observed more hornbills than I have ever seen in one location, including the Great Hornbill and the Malabar Pied Hornbill which is JOURNEYS' logo bird. There were scores of these birds all around our lodge on the Kali River. We also went out at night in search of the Sri Lanka Frogmouth and were rewarded with great views of these birds attracted to imitations of their call notes. Other species in the area included the tiny Vernal Hanging Parrot, Drongo Cuckoo, many species of Sunbirds and numerous of the south Indian endemic bird species.



Malabar Giant Squirrel in bamboo

On to Goa

From Dandeli we drove three hours to Goa. Goa was a Portuguese colony until 1962 and still retains a European flavor though the Portuguese are long gone. I had limited expectations for the tour of Old Goa, the original port site and location of spectacular cathedrals. In fact, the grandiosity of the cathedrals and churches almost exceeded the magnitude of the sins committed here in the name of God by the Portuguese. Built with the labor of African slaves and serving as headquarters for the inquisition and execution of non-believers, the original settlement was abandoned due to a cholera epidemic in the early 19th Century. The last vestiges of Portuguese political influences were purged in December 1961 and Goa became a state of India in 1962.





Goa is larger than I had thought, has more beaches and less shopping that my obviously incorrect stereotype. The beaches are broad, beautiful and clean, but for most American travelers they are not the main attraction. Russian tourists are everywhere on the beaches and have created a cultural enclave based on beer drinking and exposing large amounts of white flesh to the hot sun. The forests and colonial architecture of Goa were more interesting to us. We chose to stay at an old Portuguese mansion, Vivekanda Dos Palhacos, Large rooms furnished with antiques and old books and wonderful Goan cooking made our stay comfortable. We enjoyed a visit to the old community of Panaji and Avi and I made

a birdwatching excursion to Backwoods Camp where we observed such interesting species as Malabar Trogon, Asian Fair Bluebird and Pompadour Green Pigeon.

If you visit South India...

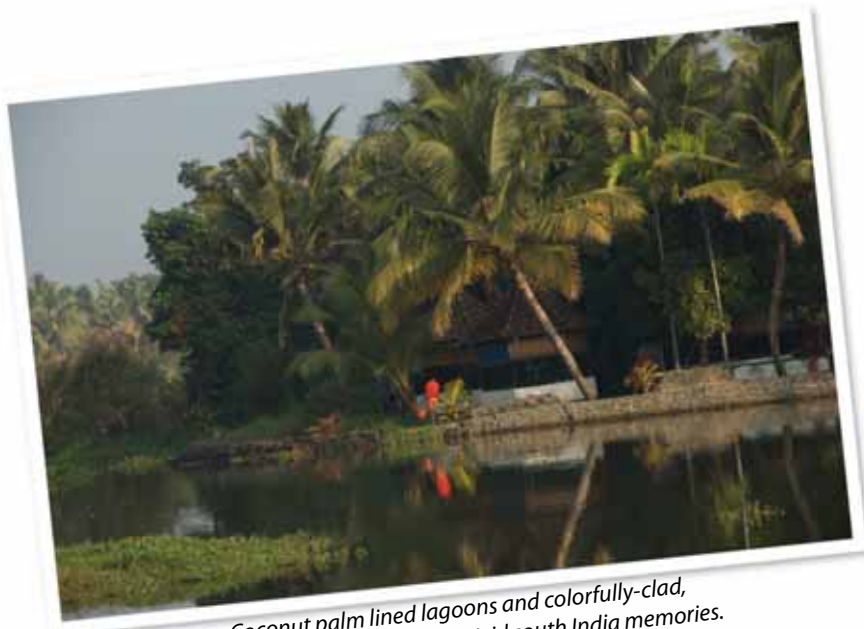
No matter how much time you have, India invites you to continue on with the temptation of cultures, wildlife and scenery dramatically different from what you may have already seen, no matter how long you have been traveling. After many visits to India since the 1970's this visit stood out for several reasons.

Throughout the trip we met friendly, educated sophisticated people. English is widely spoken in this area and it was often possible to talk with local people. However, apart from Goa, most of the travelers we met were other Indians. Even in Cochi, a favorite tourist port of call, once we left the main Fort area we met few foreign travelers and almost no Americans. The weather in January and February is superb in south India and we congratulated



Vivekanda Dos Palhacos

ourselves for having avoided the cold and snowstorms back home. The monsoon strikes this area hard in late June and July, but we were intrigued to wonder if the experience of observing the rains from the comfortable verandahs, balconies and pavillions our accommodations featured might be a very positive and unique experience in itself.



Coconut palm lined lagoons and colorfully-clad, friendly local people are vivid south India memories.



JOURNEYS
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107 Aprill Drive, Suite 3 • Ann Arbor, Michigan USA 48103-1893 • www.journeys.travel
TOLL-FREE 800-255-8735 • LOCAL & INT'L 734-665-4407 • FAX 734-665-2945 • info@journeys.travel