

Destination Southern India.

I last visited India, Rajasthan to be exact, in January 2010. My curiosity for the country had been awakened; I just had to see more.

Landed in Mumbai on Saturday 8th of Jan 2011 - massive culture shock, both physically and mentally. I had forgotten how bad the pollution was and I had forgotten about the seething mass of people. Personal space goes out of the window once you arrive in India.

The south is different to the north, in many ways. For a start it is a lot hotter at this time of year. Also, as you head further south, poverty becomes less obvious. In fact the state of Kerala is positively affluent. In 1957 Kerala was the first in the world to freely elect a communist government. Kerala's unique blend of democratic-socialist principles has an extremely good track record. Beggars in Kerala are conspicuous in their absence and even the taxi drivers are courteous!

Sadly my first day was not good - I ended up getting bitten by a street dog. At the first hospital I visited the A&E doctor dismissed the issue with a shake of his hand and a wobble of his head. I was not so sure and decided to visit another hospital, for a second opinion. The doctor at this next hospital was far more concerned. I was told that I would have to start a course of five injections. "FIVE!" I retorted in disbelief. "Mr Griffith you have been bitten by a street dog, believe me, you will need to take the injections or you may die." I decided not to argue. Two delightful young nurses then fussed around the tiny wound and patched me up. "Mr Griffith can you remove your trousers please, we need to administer injection into your bum." With a nervous cough I dropped my trousers whilst the 2 young nurses looked on with timid smiles.

Mumbai was a great city to explore and, more importantly, a great place to 'acclimatise'. I now had to start making my way south, clocking up over 2,500 kilometres before reaching Trivandrum in the far south.

From Mumbai I took a very comfortable and efficient 15 hour sleeper train to Hyderabad, another big city, south east of Mumbai.

After spending a couple of day's sight seeing in Hyderabad I took another overnight train to the extremely relaxed town of Mysore. This proved to be a wonderful place to clear my carbon monoxide saturated lungs.

Mysore has a laid back atmosphere. It was here that I visited the amazing Maharaja's Palace, one of India's grandest royal buildings. The interior of this fantastic and over the top palace is a kaleidoscope of stained glass, mirrors and gaudy colours.

From Mysore it was a harrowing 12 hour bus journey to Metupalaiyam, via Udagamandalam (also known as 'Snooty Ooty') at the foot of the Nilagiri Hills. On arriving at Ooty I was just about to board the bus, on the final leg of the journey, when a very persistent gentleman managed to convince me to join him, and some other travellers, in his taxi. "My car is much quicker than the bus" he had bleated. My instincts were shouting at me not to go with him. However, a little voice in my head also said "go on, you've already sat nine hours in a rickety old bus, what harm could it do?" Ooty is 2,240 metres above sea level. The drive down to Metupalaiyam takes 3 hours; the course of the journey involves a plethora of hair bin bends. If one fails to navigate any of these bends you can drop off the edge and plunge several hundred feet to an almost certain death. Ten minutes into the journey and we started our rapid descent. It was at this point that I began to have a bad feeling, a few seconds later I could see our driver pumping the brakes with a mad fury but nothing was happening. The next thing I knew we had ploughed into the back of a bus, steam pouring from beneath the concertina shaped bonnet of our taxi. Thankfully no one was hurt and I quickly piled out and grabbed my belongings. I noticed that the 'victim' bus was now empty as its passengers crowded around the destroyed taxi shouting and screaming at our driver.

Thankfully I caught the next bus to Metu and 3 hours later I was knocking back a cold beer in the hotel bar to help calm my shattered nerves. If those brakes had failed on one of the hair pin bends I would not be here to tell the tale.

The 'Nilagiri Passenger train - Metupalaiyam to Ooty:

Metupalaiyam has nothing to offer the traveller other than a spring board for the start of the miniature train to Ooty. This is one of the Mountain Railways of India that was given World Heritage status by UNESCO in 2005. Covering a distance of 26 miles, travelling through 16 tunnels and crossing 250 bridges, the journey takes over 5 hours. It is a tourist magnet and so had booked my ticket well in advance, for the princely sum of 120 Rupees (2 pounds). The journey offers stunning views of forests, waterfalls and tea plantations.

Once we had arrived in Ooty I made my way to Lyndal House, a delightfully restored English villa dating back to the mid 1800's, its period atmosphere was thick enough to swim in.

The onward journey took me back to Metupalaiyam, this time by bus, was again, memorable. A little girl could not cope with the constant swaying of the bus as it spun round the hair pin bends and ended up being sick. The smell and the continued swaying of the bus had a domino effect as one by one my fellow passengers proceeded to vomit through the thankfully open windows.

From Metu' I jumped on another bus which got me to Kochi in the state of Kerala - 8 hours away!

At Kochi I stayed one night on the mainland before taking the 30 minute ferry to the captivating island fortress of Kochi - a lovely peaceful place. Here I slipped on my shorts and flip flops, and switched on 'chill mode'. Kerala's deliberate and thoughtful pace of life is as contagious as the Indian head-wobble.

The spindly network of rivers, lakes and canals that make up the breathtaking backwaters of Kerala is the region's star attraction.

From Kochi the final leg of my journey was to Trivandrum a five hour train journey to catch my flight home.

Food:

Through its legendary cuisine, you soon discover that South India is a veritable culinary carnival expressed in a symphony of colours, aromas, flavours and textures. Far, far more enjoyable than food in the North!

It proved to be another awesome trip and I am so glad that I went back to discover a little more of India. As you can tell, it involved a lot of travel. I met some wonderful people who, thanks to their suggestions, will keep 'Pandora's Box of travel' open for just that little bit longer.