

Lincs with India Newsletter

An Adventure in India

We arrived at Trivandrum Airport and immediately India made us welcome. After trying to shorten the string to tie our cases onto the roof of the taxi by burning the nylon rope with his lighter, our driver decided the cases would be safe enough simply perched on the roof rack with no fastening. We set off keeping an eye on the back window to check that our baggage was not adding to all the other hazards on the road.

Our first introduction to India's roads was fascinating. Driving on the left was for the faint hearted. Only the avoidance of a head on collision at the last minute gave our driver any sense of satisfaction.

The roadside, as we discovered later, was where all life happened. People live, work and eat close to the arteries that criss-cross this wonderful country. They spill onto the roads in the countryside and in the towns and villages and mingle happily with the traffic. Cows of all descriptions roam freely and are treated as mobile traffic islands to be negotiated.

Our first hotel in Kovalam was perched on the edge of the Indian Ocean with wonderful views. This was to be our gentle tourist introduction to India. At night as we sat in one of the many restaurants eating wonderful fish dishes, we looked out over the Ocean at the myriads of little lights from the fishing boats catching our King Fish, Barracuda and Red Snapper.

Transport to Vizhinjam, the local fishing village, was our first experience of the Tuk Tuk. These little vehicles look and sound like an overgrown wasp. They buzz along impervious to the jugganaughts that surround them and from the cramped interior you get a wonderful sense of the sounds, smells and visual impact of the local area.

Vizhinjam bustled with life. The people bartered and haggled over the catches of small fish brought in by the local fishermen in their dug out canoes and the port was packed with the brightly coloured larger fishing boats used for deep sea fishing. This was an area where Muslims, Hindus and Christians appeared to coexist and where the respective churches could be seen close together.

Our journey to Maduria on dry dusty roads with many hairpin bends was punctuated every now and then with the site of approaching mobile haystacks. At some sections of the road these haystacks occupied the full width road creating traffic jams and causing much excitement and shouting.

We stopped at the Special School in Srivilliputhur where we met Ignatius and the children in the school. The children clearly have significant special needs and the dedicated staff work very hard with the limited resources to meet those needs. Younger children were using simple toys and the older children in the vocational group were making a type of disinfectant from jasmine flowers and other natural materials. Parents of handicapped children in India find it hard to accept that their child is different. With the help of a worker from the Spastic Society the school has established a support programme for parents on Saturdays. We left the school feeling that these children in their cramped little classrooms were the lucky ones; but how much more could be achieved with the right resources.

When our bus broke down outside a wayside “garage” (a shed and a tree) the resourcefulness of the Indian mechanic soon got us on our way again. The Western Germanus Hotel in Maduria was the base from which we would journey to see the tribal children at SDETLand. However, our first excursion into Madurai was to see the Meenakshi Temple. The current Temple was built in the 17th C; however, a Temple has been on the site for over 2000 years. The Temple is dedicated to the Lord Shiva and is made up of a complex of magnificent gopurams or towers. These are extraordinarily beautiful, decorated with striking images and highly painted. Following our barefoot tour of the temple we engaged in some retail therapy at Hajeemoosa’s emporium.

Our first encounter with the tribal children was at the Athisayam Theme Park. Lincs with India had paid for all the children to attend the park as a treat and for many this would be the first time they had been to such place. We finally found the park after an interesting if somewhat wayward tour of the Indian Sub-Continent and met the children who had just been in the water play park. They were clearly very excited by their experience and perhaps a little bemused by this group of blotchy pink people who suddenly appeared. Following lunch we accompanied the children round the “dry” rides, some of our members risking life and limb to join in with the children. An ice cream concluded the day for the children. For some of the little ones the experience had been just too much as they fell fast asleep on the park benches.

The following day we visited the Tribal Settlement of Kurinja Nagar. The only remaining Balwadi (pre-school) is situated in this settlement. On our arrival the people greeted us and the women put bindi, red and yellow dots, on our foreheads. The children appreciated the sugar cane we had brought as a treat and quickly demolished the tough fibrous delicacy. Our rendition of Ten Green Bottles was met with polite bewilderment and the children laughed with delight when we tried to pronounce their names. The little girl Vasiammal, featured in previous newsletters, was there with her grandparents and she appeared to be doing very well. The resettlement of the Tribal families is an on-going and difficult issue.

Following our visit to the borehole at Thumbaiyapuram, provided by the Alford and Mablethorpe Rotary Club, we were made welcome at the local village with flowers, fruit and much tongue wobbling. Valayapatti and Chokklampatti schools were our next port of call and in both schools the children entertained us with well-known English nursery rhymes including a delightful rendition of Hot Cross Buns. On then to the boys’ hostel at STEDLand and the official opening of the new hostel. The Special School housed in the complex was run on similar lines to the one at Srivilliputhur and some of the older children were engaged in making paper bags from newspaper. We left some tactile wall charts to help the teachers.

The official opening ceremony had been very carefully planned and orchestrated by Ignatius. As we walked between the rows of children and staff lined up to greet us, we were welcomed with garlands of flowers. There was much symbolism contained within the ceremony. Lamps were lit in each room by the women of our group to symbolise bringing new life, light and hope into the new building. We each poured a cup of milk into a cooking pot to symbolise everyone contributing to the communal life of the building. We later drank the milk as part of the meal prepared for us and all the children and staff. The new building is very good and during the speeches it was clear that all the staff and children were thrilled to have, in their terms, such luxurious

accommodation. When all the ceremonies were over, the time came for the long awaited cricket match between the boys and the men of our group. A brief discussion on the interpretation of the rules and the condition of the pitch was quickly followed by our team batting. This was a not a pretty sight but we managed to gather together 50 runs, a creditable target we thought. However, after ten minutes, a couple of sixes and 10 fours we lost!

We left the hostel to return to Madurai with the children running across the compound to wave their farewells. We had met the little boy we sponsor for the first time and we wondered when we might see him again. Before we left the area we visited the girls' hostel and the comparison between this and the new boys hostel made us resolve to do all we could to ensure that these lovely happy little girls also had a nice place in which to live.

We left the buzz, the dust, the death defying tuk tuk rides, the people asleep on the roadside pavements, the church clock playing 'Three Blind Mice', the cows rummaging through the rubbish in the streets, the wonderful sense of excitement and anticipation and the kind, warm and friendly people of Madurai to journey over the Cardamon Hills to Cochin.

Driving over the Western Ghats was fascinating. We saw wonderful scenery, drove over the edge of three sheer cliffs and had a further glimpse into the diverse culture of the Indian people. We stopped for a coffee beside a Spice Garden, which turned out to belong to Mr Abraham. The garden was featured on the recent BBC2 programme of gardens round the world introduced by Monty Don. Cochin was a huge contrast to Madurai with much more of a Western feel. Our hotel in Cochin was called the Abad Plaza but in truth it was not too bad!

Our first day in Cochin or Kochi was packed with sight seeing. St Francis Church was the first post of call. Said to be the oldest European built church in India it is simple but atmospheric. The old 'air-conditioning' system operated by punkah wallahs from outside the church is still in evidence. Vasco de Gama was originally buried in St Francis church before his remains were taken to Lisbon. Following the church we drove to the shoreline to see the cantilevered Chinese fishing nets. These are remarkable in construction and design. They look like giant hair nets waiting to fall in the water. However, I'm not sure how effective they are since they can only be used right next to the shore and the smart fish will swim a few yards off shore. Still have you ever met a smart fish? After a brief scamper round an Indian Habitat store we visited the Dutch Palace. This was built by the Portuguese in 1555 and presented to the Raja of Cochin as a goodwill gesture. We travelled back to the other side of the port and our hotel by the local ferry. The boat was more rust than metal but the fare was only 3.5 rupees for a 25minute trip so was good value and the three life jackets for the hundred or so passengers provided a warm sense of security.

The Kerala Backwaters was our destination for the following day. This vast expanse of huge lagoons and water hyacinth channels is a fascinating blend of nature and human habitat. Like Ratty in *Wind in the Willows* the people on the backwaters live on the water, in the water and by the water and all life is governed by it. Our converted rice boat provided a luxurious method of transport and as we glided along we passed people washing their clothes, their hair, themselves and their pots. There

was clear evidence of the richness of the area in terms of agriculture and wildlife since the surrounding fields clearly had lush crops growing and the bird life was abundant including beautiful king fishers.

As we left Kochi the following day to return to Trivandrum we happened upon a temple elephant being led along the road. The mahoots were amenable to bribes and allowed a number of our group to sit on the back of the animal. Sitting was the easy part. Getting up onto the elephant's back required much pushing and shoving by the mahoots on parts of Western anatomies that were never meant to be shoved!

Stopping for rest at Vakala gave us an opportunity to have a brief glance at this picturesque coastal resort and to feast for the last time in India on the wonderful fish dishes that are a part of the coastal region. As we ate our meal, we looked out over the sea at the little dugout canoes defying maritime law with water washing over their plimsoll lines and at the sea eagles being mobbed by the crows.

Arriving at our hotel in Trivandrum revealed it to be an authentic Indian establishment in many respects! I liked it but others were less keen and repaired to the luxury of a nearby five star hotel. After a good night's sleep, for some, we set off the next day to see the Hindu temple of Sri Padmanabhaswamy. The women pilgrims visiting the temple presented a vibrant image in their richly coloured saris. We visited the nearby Palace museum, which was originally the home of the rajas of Travancore and provided a haven from the dusty bustle or the crowds outside the temple.

Walking across the street (walk directly with purpose and allow the traffic to flow around you) past a statue of Gandhi we entered the busy market area. Here you could buy almost anything including shiny pots and pans, vegetables of all kinds and fish some of which was dried and looked like tissue paper.

Our final day in India was spent on a drive into the hills. We visited the St Thomas Mount Mission hospice run by Roman Catholic nuns. The men and women in the hospice have nothing and yet are the lucky ones. They are cared for and given clothes, food and a bed. For everyone in the hospice there must be thousands without this nurture and they are the forgotten ones often abandoned by their families and society. One blind man sang a song for us whilst his friend beat out the rhythm on the bench. This was a very moving experience.

We continued our drive around twenty two hair pin bends and over surfaces euphemistically called a road to a tea plantation high up in the hills and amidst spectacular scenery. The rows of tree bushes spread below us like a huge jigsaw where you only have the sky pieces to put in. On the way back we talked to a villager who was harvesting latex from the rubber trees and he showed us how this is then converted into sheets which are bundled up and sent for processing.

We left India the following day. For me there was a real sense of regret in leaving such warm and friendly people and in leaving a country with such a rich tapestry of cultures and creativity. The Indian people are a happy people who smile and nod enthusiastically. Many also have a hard life and poverty is evident everywhere. We can only do small things but what we can do makes a difference to the lives of some people and surely that is worth doing.