

# Seven Weeks in South India

(on Seven Hundred U.S. Dollars!)

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For me, India used to be one of those countries that I've always put off travelling to because its sheer size and very colourful cultural, historical and geographical diversity deserve more than just a few weeks to proverbially “do justice” to it. So with the December 26th 2004 tsunami have happened a couple of months before, along with a strong desire to volunteer in helping out, plus being in between jobs and having two wonderful girls to go with, the beginning of March 2005 seemed as perfect a time as any to go.

The friends I went with, Ane Mari Aakernes, from Norway, and Kasia Wierzbicka, from Poland, are both models who were working in Hong Kong. Ane Mari is also a filmmaker, and Kasia is an avid yoga practitioner in search of a more spiritually-meaningful existence. Working on a freelance basis, Ane Mari meets a lot of people in both of her professions. One of those is an event manager named Aftab, who has lived in Hong Kong for decades and happened to have a very good childhood friend from primary school living in Mumbai. So when we flew to the city formerly (and still popularly) known by its colonial name Bombay in the wee hours of the morning of March 4th, Pradeep Marwaha's driver came and picked us up at Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport, where we were waiting. We got in the car and he drove while we were fascinated by people sleeping in the oddest of places on the sides of the road,

along with the presence of makeshift bonfires everywhere. It was too bad for us that we couldn't communicate with the driver, for unlike many Indians we were to encounter, he wasn't able to speak English.

The beautiful flat and furniture made it quite obvious that these people were well off, and it was not simply just because they had a driver. We slept comfortably, and the next morning, their two maids treated us to tea, biscuits and delicious breakfasts. I couldn't believe this kind of hospitality shown to complete strangers, but as we were to find out later on, in India they say that the “Guest is God”. Since we didn't want to get in the way of Mini as she had the responsibilities of taking her two young sons to school, I called up a Cathay Pacific flight attendant friend of mine whom I also know from living in Hong Kong named Mani Goel, as I knew she was going to be in Mumbai at the same time as us.

It was really nice to see Mani on her proverbial side of the tracks! She took us to a fast food joint, where we got to sample very tasty local delicacies such as pani puri, basket chat and yummy desserts made of sweetened condensed milk (most of which were not familiar to us since typical Indian restaurants found outside of India tend to have more Punjabi cuisine). From there, we continued to go to the beautiful Mahalakshmi

Temple, dedicated to Vishnu's consort, Lakshmi (sometimes spelled "Laxmi"), the goddess of wealth. Since the temple was situated on a rock overlooking of the sea, the view from the back was stunning. Beggars right next to the temple made their home on the rocks, but behind fences of barbed wire. The enormous gap between the rich and the poor in this country was slowly becoming obvious to us.

Behind this little makeshift slum was a clear view of Haji Ali Mosque, dedicated to a Muslim saint, where we went to next. The causeway leading to the mosque gets submerged during high tide, leaving those on the grounds "stranded" until low tide sets in. The entire length of it was full of beggars, most of whom were amputees or had some sort of disability. Many of these beggars are controlled by a "beggar master", a pimp-like person who collects a certain percentage of their earnings every day in exchanging for the "rights" to a certain spot! Interestingly enough, Mani pointed out that as a Hindu, her family would not approve of her going to Haji Ali Mosque at all, so she was glad that we went with her.

After a stop for a deliciously sweet masala tea, which seems to be the national drink of India as it is literally found everywhere, we continued on north in the horrendous traffic jam and made it to Juhu, where Mani took us to the Hare Krishna Mandir (temple). We saw the pooja (service), which had a very nice atmosphere. It was interesting to see the large amount of money spent (there was even an adjoining hotel!) at the "headquarters" of this religion, thanks to its popularity increase in the 1960s and 1970s, when members of The Beatles became followers.

The next day, we took a train from Bandra to Churchgate station, where we walked down past the impressive colonial architecture of the Kala Ghoda area to the "Gateway of India" built in

commemoration of King George V's visit in 1911. Beside this was the impressive Taj Mahal Hotel, but ultimately, of no real interest to us, except that it was a big luxury hotel for the ultra rich. From here, we caught the ferry to Elephanta Island, where caves containing religious statues related to Shiva were carved out of the rock between 450 and 750 A.D. The walk around the island was serene and completed with monkeys, while boat ride there and back was lovely, with music playing in the background. It was obvious with the view from the water that Mumbai used to be a city of islands, most of which are now attached together by land reclamation.

Back to the mainland, we went to the Colaba Market, where we bought loads of nice, comfortable Indian clothes, beautiful shoes, accessories and jewellery, all of which were so cheap. Before our first purchases, a local man came up to us and whispered that we should bargain with the vendors at 25% of what he or she had originally asked, a wise piece of advice we were to follow for the entire trip, and prevented us from being too heavily ripped off as tourists.

We returned to Bandra by train in the very forward-thinking "Ladies Only" car, where Mini and Pradeep took us to their friends' place. We were very impressed with the highly intellectual nature of the conversations we had, and the intelligence of Indian people in general was a characteristic we were to find throughout our journey. However, they were impressed with us for taking the "dangerous" and "dirty" local trains, something they would never do in their income brackets. We drank and tried Indian spirits, including feni, a Goan alcohol made from fermented cashews. The whole crew of us went out to eat afterwards, as late night restaurant visits are apparently the norm at weekends amongst Mumbai's well-heeled. Next door to the restaurant was H<sub>2</sub>O, a new nightclub, owned by one of their

Sikh friends (who was seen with his arm around some pretty young thing) and full of beautiful rich people. Standing in stark contrast to this, on the way back home, we noticed people digging through the garbage, collecting plastic bottles and aluminium cans for 20 rupees (about 50 U.S. cents) a night. Pradeep called it “India’s own recycling programme”. I couldn’t help but felt extremely sorry for those people, especially after the wonderful night we just had.

The next day, we headed to the Jehangir Art Gallery, foregoing the National Gallery of Modern Art and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (the new name of the place formerly known as the Prince of Wales Museum) because of their outrageous entrance fees for foreigners, and the fact that they were about to close. At Jehangir, the works of three artists were on display, one of whom had said that she would have “love[d] it if [we] bought one of her paintings”, showing us that foreigners were automatically viewed as potential buyers. On the way home on the train, we stopped to enjoy a beautiful scene in a slum next to Bandra Station where people were cooking and singing. No money, but happy.

After saying good-bye to our wonderful host family, Mini dropped us off at the bus stop, and we boarded an overnight sleeper bus to Mapusa in Goa state. Opting for the more expensive air conditioned bus turned out to be a bad idea, as both Ane Mari and I remained uncomfortably cold throughout the night. Upon arrival, we took an auto-rickshaw to Calangute Beach, staying at a guesthouse run by a beautiful-looking half-Goan/half-Portuguese guy named Francis. The Portuguese arrived in Goa in 1510, unable to secure a base on the Malabar coast due to the Turks, who at the time, controlled the trade routes across the Indian Ocean. In their quest to control the “Spice Route” and to spread the word of Christianity, they colonized the state until

1961, when India got rid of them in an almost bloodless coup. The ever-present churches that were everywhere still bore a relic of Portuguese presence.

Walking along the beach, the girls stopped off to buy jewellery from Kashmiri salesmen, and as we were to find out, Kashmiris are famous for jewellery, carpets, artworks and all sorts of handicrafts throughout the country. Some even say that when buying from Kashmiris, one is supporting the arms race and further the fighting between India and Pakistan, or quests for independence in the northernmost state of Jammu and Kashmir. Either way, the guys were very nice to us, giving us delicious Kashmiri tea to drink and chatting about the political situation with Pakistan.

On our way back, we stumbled across a hut called “Friends’ Corner” run by a bunch of dope-smoking guys called Raju and his brother Issac. These boys were the sons of a Muslim man and a Hindu woman, who ran off and got married against their parents’ wishes. Also staying with them was a fifty year-old Swedish hippy woman named Maria, who first came to Goa in 1973, hitchhiking all the way from Sweden to India by herself! Working as a nurse throughout the year in Sweden, she still spends half of every year in Goa. There were loads of other “long-termers”-backpackers who planned to travel all over India (and even south Asia), but got “stuck” in Goa and never left.

So we met up with them later on, and eventually made it to Anjuna beach, home of Goa’s famous trance parties. The boys had told us that there have been a lot of police crackdowns on the parties as of late, but because it was Shivaratri, a festival observed in honour of Lord Shiva, they didn’t expect much trouble on such a holy occasion. It was hard to get to the place, and it got

us clambering over rocks to reach it, which made it even more difficult with a dark new moon on the way and no flashlights. Luckily, lighters did the trick. Just after we finally got there around one a.m., the music slowed to a halt, briefly started up again, only to stop for good.

Very tired, we three girls went to bed. Kasia and I got up the next morning and went for a run. I swam, and then walked up to Canolim and Sinquerim beaches, near Fort Aguada. We picked up Maria and went to the famous Anjuna Wednesday Market, started in the 1960s by hippies who had no money, forcing them to sell their stuff in order to either continue staying in Goa or to head off travelling. It was one of the largest markets I'd ever seen, but apparently wasn't as good as the weekly Saturday Night Market. All sorts of Indian-style clothing, jewellery, artwork, music, etc. were sold by people from all over the country, including Tibetan refugees hailing from the north. Goa is the place these people flock to for business during the tourist season, heading back home when the monsoon is set to hit. We all bought a lot of things, and probably would have bought more had we not been faced with the reality of being forced to carry it all with us during the weeks ahead! We walked along Anjuna beach afterwards, which was remarkably different during the day, and stopped in a bar to listen to a live band, then a guy on a sitar following him. It made for a nice atmosphere, with all the people interacting with each other. A Rajasthani man played flute next to his donkey, which especially touched Ane Mari in particular, all making for a fantastic day!

We got up the next morning and rented motorbikes from a bunch of friendly, trustworthy mechanics, picked up Maria, and drove to Panaji, the not-so-interesting state capital, then onto Old Goa. With huge vehicles over-taking us on narrow roads, the drive was really scary and cool.

With Maria on the back of my bike, I did not want to drive at all. In Old Goa, we first checked out the Basilica de Bom Jesus, first constructed in 1594. The remains of St. Francis Xavier (who was sent to spread Christianity throughout all of Portugal's colonies), was up on a covered platform, all shriveled and bony-looking. Apparently there was a "miracle" of his body remaining intact for months after he died, not even rotting after lime was added to assist the decomposition process. Also his body is supposedly displayed to the masses once every ten years in a festival.

We saw the Se Convent and the Church of St. Francis of Assisi, with the adjoining archaeological museum, along with paintings of old Portuguese governors. We then had some tea served to us by some guys who seemed slightly retarded, but they were very nice, constantly doing the Indian side-to-side head roll, equivalent to a nodding of the head in western societies.

Stopped by the Church of St. Augustine Ruins at the top of a hill, originally built in 1602, and then fell apart in 1842, with the facade and half the tower collapsing in 1931 due to neglect. We met an archaeologist on site who had a team of workers removing rocks for him, whom he paid 100 rupees per day and made them work for no longer than eight hours, with rest and water/food breaks, which was a better working condition than for most of the poor in the country. No wonder they seemed happy, singing as they worked. They were searching for the forearm "relic" of a queen from Georgia, married to a Muslim who refused to convert from Christianity. That archaeologists' theory was that this relic had to have been brought to and buried here in Old Goa.

Leaving Old Goa and passing through Panaji once again, we took an alternate route back, passing through cool, peaceful villages and just soaking in the amazing atmosphere. We stopped

at what we thought there was a wedding, only to find out that it was a Christian funeral procession! Although we got home late, Kasia and I got up early the next morning for the last little motorbike ride before they had to return (as we had given a 24 hour rental). We made our way to Fort Chapora, which was past Anjuna beach, after taking the wrong way! Since Kasia was running on empty, we paid someone 20 rupees to siphon off the excess gas from mine into her tank, since I had over-filled mine earlier. The view from the top of the hill upon which Fort Chapora was perched was stunning, with the aquamarine sea just glowing.

Back at the hotel, we checked out, said goodbye to the gang, and then walked to catch the local bus to Mapusa. Getting off, we decided to go to the local market, and then continued on to the state capital of Panaji, then to Margao. From there, we went to Canacona, and then finally arrived at Palolem Beach by sunset. Many touts saw us even before we got off the bus, each of them pushing us to go with him, as he supposedly had the best deal for accommodation. After searching, we settled on a cosy, family-run place, and ate a delicious dinner.

We got up early the next morning for a run and swim. Being a beach place that had a surprisingly large number of foreigners, we spent our time walking along the rocky outcrops, swimming, eating, drinking and chilling out. We hired some fishermen and their boat to take us to see dolphins. Unfortunately, they weren't out that day, which was too bad. We stopped at the nearby "Butterfly Beach" on the way back and met some cool people, so it wasn't all a loss!

I then took an overnight bus to Bangalore, the capital of Karnataka state, by myself. While waiting for the bus, I met an English guy named Jack, who worked on tsunami relief in Chennai (formerly known as Madras, the capital of Tamil Nadu state). His stories of what he saw were heart-

wrenching, and I couldn't help but had a deep admiration for him. Prior to coming to India, both Ane Mari and I tried to get in touch with various aid organizations and NGOs (non-governmental organizations) to see if we could volunteer to help out in the relief effort. Every single one of them said that they need people trained in disaster and/or emergency medical relief, along with people who could speak local languages. That made people like us more of a liability to them than of any sort of assistance, which was such a shame, as we really wanted to help out.

On the reclining seat next to me in the bus was a young Indian guy, who attempted to talk to me. At first I was wary of him, but he turned out to be a nice person, buying me a tea when we stopped at a cafe the following morning. He thought that it was cool that I was Canadian, as he told me that he worked at a call centre for a Canadian bank in Bangalore. Outsourcing jobs to people in countries like India with a highly intellectual population who will work for less money is becoming a common thing for multi-national companies to do. Many of these Indian people who work for call centres for companies with their headquarters based in developed countries are required to get rid of their Indian accents. Along with everyone aspiring to wear the same luxury brands of clothing and eat at the same crappy fast food chains, I find this to be yet another example of how "globalization" results in "homogenization" into Western culture, where cultural differences are to be erased instead of celebrated. Anyway, if India is swiftly becoming the outsourcing capital of the world, then Bangalore is definitely its capital city.

I called my friend Ramsay Abraham the following morning, a friend I knew during the very last leg of the ten years he spent in Hong Kong. He has been back in his native India with his French-Spanish girlfriend Eva Camarasa, whom he met

in H.K. Picking me up in his car, it was nice to finally see him after all this time. Since he had some negotiations to do on a new contract he was about to sign with his company, I went to Cubbon Park, noting the red-bricked High Court while avoiding a dodgy man who tried to act like a tour guide, explaining the history of the buildings to me, then asking for my phone number. Walked to the Vidhana Soudha, which is what the buildings of the State Legislature and Secretariat are collectively known as, then back through Cubbon Park and a stadium to get to Lavelle Road and Mahatma Gandhi (locally known as “M.G.” Road), one of which is in every major city in India. There I met Eva in her office, then went out for drinks with her colleagues. Ramsay and his cousin Sandeep, who works for a major animation company, joined us later on, then we moved on to a very nice Thai restaurant for dinner. Sandeep’s parents live in Kochi in Kerala state, and he offered for us to stay with them, as he was on his way there in a few days.

The girls arrived in Bangalore the next day, and Ramsay drove us to Lalbagh Botanical Gardens, talking about the ancient Pali roots of the local language Kannada along with Indian politics. It was beautiful, the lakes, the sunset, the extremely tall pine and very big old banyan tree. We stayed until dark, and the plan to meet Eva at Taika, a gorgeously well-designed restaurant with adjoining night club, was thwarted by the very heavy traffic. It got so bad that civilians even got out of their cars (a kid joined in on the action too!) to help direct the cars out of the unbelievably over-clogged intersections! I had never seen worse traffic in my life!

We didn’t stay that late at Taika, as we planned to get up early to go to Bannerghatta National Park. We went on a safari, seeing sambar and other species of deer, Asiatic black bears, and various species of tigers and Asian lions, which

were smaller than their African counterparts. The tiger species included the endangered Bengal species, one of which was an albino. Most of them were rescued from horrible conditions, brought back and rehabilitated there. Afterwards, we walked around a zoo they had on the premises, marvelling at the snakes (including a king cobra), the aquarium, birds and even leopards. The keeper even allowed us to see the younger leopard cubs, including two tiny 15 day olds!

Heading back to Bangalore well after nightfall, Ramsay got stopped for speeding. He sped off on the police whilst he was supposed to be writing up the ticket, but the cop managed to catch up with us after hopping on the back of someone else’s motorbike, which was hilarious! Instead of paying the fine, Ramsay simply gave into the officer’s demand for 100 rupees. Such was the way thing being done in India, despite current Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s promise to stamp out corruption.

I offered to go and book train tickets for everyone the next day. Trains in India get booked for weeks in advance, so the most I was able to do was to get on a waiting list for the one to Kochi (also known as Cochin). I then took an auto-rickshaw to the bustling City Market, checked out the Fort (which is a mud brick defence structure built in the 18th century), and Tipu Sultan’s palace, which had nice wooden pillars made of teak. I checked out THREE private bus companies and only the third one was able to sell us “semi-sleeper” (that is, reclining seats) tickets to Kozhikode (formerly known as Calicut). I called Sandeep, who was already in Kochi by this point, and he encouraged me to get train tickets from Kozhikode to Kochi, which I managed to do. By the time I got back to Ramsay’s and Eva’s, everyone was worriedly waiting for me. All packed up, we said our good-byes and left in the cab that Ramsay had ordered for us.

We slept pretty well on the way to Kozhikode. Once we arrived, we walked through town to get to the train station in the dark, just as dawn was breaking. It was so cool to see all the vendors getting their wares ready for sale before the sun came up. We got on the train with no problems, and slept well in the “Ladies Only” car.

Sandeep picked us up at the Ernakulam Junction train station in Kochi at around noon. Ayemenem, about 38 kilometres from Kochi, is the setting for the Booker prize-winning novel, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy; however, Kochi is also heavily featured in it too. The first thing I noticed about the place was that it was noticeably less polluted than the other big cities we went to. Once at the Mohan residence, which was a beautiful traditional Keralan house with a central courtyard open to the outside, we were treated to a delicious lunch of minced squid, salad and dahl after having showers. Sandeep’s mother, Penelope, is half English and both parents welcomed us so wonderfully, since having their only child plus some guests around was a pleasure for them and it showed.

We eventually got on a tour boat that took us around the city. It first stopped in an industrialized shipping area, and then continued on to the place known as “Jew Town”, where the descendants of those who escaped Palestine 2000 years ago continue to live. Although I knew that Ramsay is Jewish, it struck me as a bit oddly unexpected, but interesting nevertheless, to see a thriving Jewish community in India. We visited Pardesi Synagogue, originally built in 1568, then destroyed by the Portuguese in 1662, and rebuilt by the Dutch two years later after they took over Kochi with their Dutch East India Company (or V.O.C.). The ticket collector was a non-Indian direct descendant of the original Palestinian refugees. The most striking feature of the synagogue was the tiled floor (hand

painted so that no two were alike) from China. These tiles actually get mentioned in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* by Salman Rushdie. An adjoining art gallery had paintings which outlined how these Jews came to Kochi.

Continuing on to Mattancherry Palace, walking past Stars of David next to Hindu gods on shop fronts, which was uniquely interesting. The Palace was originally built by the Portuguese in 1555 as a present to Veera Kerala Varma, the Raja of Cochin (most likely for trading privileges). It featured paintings of the different rajas along with explanations of what they accomplished politically, sedan chairs, hats, weaponry, and frescoes depicting scenes from the Ramayana Mahabharata and Puranic legends. Headed to Fort Cochin, which used to be fortified, by isn’t anymore. There, we walked through the streets to St. Francis Church, where the famous Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama was buried for fourteen years after his death in Kochi in 1524, and before his body was sent back to Lisbon. We passed by a “snake charmer” who really angered a king cobra in a basket and wore another kind of snake around his neck, “charming” neither of them and just played his flute. Walking along the shore, there were these huge Chinese fishing nets upon which fish are caught and served immediately in the restaurants. Back on the boat, we passed by Vypeen Island, which had beaches and quite a thriving community, then Bolghatty Island, which was mostly full of resorts, and finally headed back to shore.

From there, we went to a desert place, where Sandeep told us about his fiancée living in the U. K. and how her family is rich, so he’s not sure that they’ll approve of their plan to get married. He then took us to Broadway Street, a shopping street that was quite dead on that particular Sunday. Getting back home by public bus,

everyone was waiting for us, and we had another lovely dinner. The conversation was pleasant, with such nice people. The croaking of the frogs in the lagoon behind the house lulled us to a very restful sleep.

After packing up and taking pictures, we said good-bye to our lovely hosts who wanted us to stay longer. We got on a bus to Alappuzha, where we boarded a boat that took us on an eight-hour journey through the “Backwaters” of Kerala all the way to Kollam. The ride was full of peaceful, water-side villages, where people went fishing, did laundry, and basically just going about their daily routines. Our lunch stop involved eating on a banana leaf with our hands, and everybody tried it. I actually liked it too!

Upon our arrival in Kollam, we headed to Thiruvananthapuram (formerly known as Trivandrum). Once there, we got a taxi to take us to the Sivanada Yoga Ashram in the Neyyar Wildlife Sanctuary. Ashram is a Sanskrit word referring to a spiritual community or any place where seekers meet, presumably for instruction, under the authority or auspices of a guru. Everyone was fast asleep by the time we arrived, but the people on guard gave us bedding, and we settled in the dormitories and did the same shortly thereafter.

Sivananda Yoga was inspired by the work of Swami Sivananda, who was born in 1887 in Pattamadai in Tamil Nadu state. Having graduated from medical school, he was initially known as Dr. Kuppaswami, and after having had the opportunity to cure a wandering sannyasin (a monk who has renounced his belief), he learned about yoga and the vedanta (the philosophy which comes from the sacred scriptures called the Upanishads, which are the final part of the ancient texts known as the Vedas) from him. He

became an avid spiritual practitioner, and one of his disciples, Swami Vishnu-Devananda, was sent to the west in 1957. He eventually founded the Sivananda Yoga movement, establishing twenty yoga centers and seven ashrams, plus many affiliated centres and teachers.

Woken up at 5:30 a.m. by the roar of the lions in the adjoining animal sanctuary, we got ready and began our meditation session from 6:00, then did some chanting until 7:30. I found it quite difficult to get my wandering mind to focus for long periods of time. The chanting initially caught me off-guard, as I found it very cult-like, but I grew to appreciate the beauty in those songs. One of the teachers leading the chanting up at the front had a very lovely voice. A short tea break was followed by two hours of yoga asanas until 10:00, at which time we had our first meal of the day. I initially found some poses difficult, such as sirshasana (headstand) and kakasana (or “the crow”), but the teachers were very compassionate and helpful with my practice. Plus, I felt wonderful afterwards!

Following our delicious vegetarian meals which we ate with our hands, we had the option of some personal yoga coaching, followed by a few hours either to ourselves or to do “karma yoga” duties, which included cleaning up and sweeping. At 2:00 p.m. , we had a lecture, then a tea break at 3:00. From 4:00 until 6:00, we did another two hours of asanas, then dinner and evening meditation and chanting. We continued this for three days, but some of them were different, for example, I had a soothing ayurvedic oil massage on one afternoon. Also, on one of the nights, we had our meditation session on the edge of Neyyar Dam (which was known to have crocodiles in it) in the bright moonlight. On the last night, a performance of Kathakali, traditional Keralan dance, was put on for us, which was beautifully and skilfully performed in Malayalam, the state language.





One thing I left with after four days at the ashram was that everybody seems to have their own theories on how to achieve happiness, but at the end of the day, these are just theories, and everyone has to find her or his own path and what works best on an individual basis in order to achieve it. On Fridays at the ashram, everyone can choose to have the day off, maybe to go into town, or to the beach, or on one of the trips they organize. Kasia decided to go on the “Jungle Trip”, while Ane Mari and I decided to go on the trip to Kanyakumari (formerly known as Cape Cormorin), the southern-most tip of India. It was at this point that Ane Mari and I began travelling as a pair, since Kasia decided to stay in the ashram for three weeks.

After getting up for the morning meditation, the first stop was in Thirparappu Falls, right next to the Matadiya Shiva Temple, right on the border with Tamil Nadu state. The temple had a golden mask and “Shiva footprint”. Ane Mari and I then went for a dip in the waterfall. The people bathing in the waters above it was interesting to see, and the falls themselves had separated men’s and women’s sections.

The next destination was Padmanabhapuram Palace, where the royal family of Travancore (a kingdom in southern Kerala) lived from 1550 for about 400 years. The wood carvings were exquisite and the dance hall, with its intricate granite pillars, where traditional Kathakali performances were held, was gorgeously designed and constructed. The archaeological museum next door was only slightly interesting. Finally reaching Kanyakumari, where the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea all meet, we caught a ferry to the Swami Vivekananda memorial. It was here where we first saw evidence of the destruction of the December 26th tsunami, full of damaged buildings and destroyed fishing boats. The memorial was

dedicated to a monk who travelled all across India in a Hinduism religious crusade and meditated for three whole days on the rock upon which his memorial is built. The huge 40 metres tall statue next to him is dedicated to the Tamil poet Tiruvalluvar.

Having taken the boat back to shore, we went to Kumari Amman Temple, dedicated to the goddess Devi. We then checked out the Gandhi memorial, which is constructed to look like an Orissan temple, where some of his ashes were kept before being thrown out to sea. Every 2nd of October, which is his birthday, the sun rays are positioned such that they fall on this exact spot. Ane Mari and I enjoyed the amazing sunset, and then proceeded to dip our feet into the sacred waters where the three bodies of water meet. We met loads of people who were crowded on the beach at that time, including a group of guys who wanted to take pictures with us and allowed us to don one of their turbans!

From there, we caught a bus to Nagercoil, then on to Madurai. We arrived well after midnight, but managed to find a nice room in the Hotel Aryaas, the nicest one we stayed in so far on this trip. The next morning, we went into town and met a driver on a bicycle built to carry passengers who told us that we have “nothing to worry about”, as he is a “family man” with “many foreign friends” whom he proceeded to name for us!

Having dropped us off at a shop run by Kashmiris, he let us have a view of Sri Meenakshi temple from the rooftop of their store, apparently a common practice to get people to buy their wares. We continued on to Madurai Market, where the few vendors that were so nice to us! We greeted everyone with a cheery “Vanakkam!” (“Hello” in Tamil), so they joked around as Ane Mari filmed

them. The flower market was next, where large numbers of blooms were sold in bulk for garlands to be sold in temples. The floor was mucky and smelled of cow urine, but that didn't matter in the slightest. The experiences we had with real locals were just amazing.

We finally got into the temple after it had been closed up until the early afternoon. Instantly, we were bombarded by vendors trying to sell us their wares. The "1000 Pillared Hall" was where we went next, and the temple art museum was located there. The sculptures of various Hindu gods (including a beautiful one of Nataraja, the cosmic dancer) were well carved and the ambience of the dark place was very peaceful. The main hall was entirely made of stone, dating back 2000 years to when Madurai was a Pandyan capital, but we got kicked out after we ignored the "Hindus only" sign in the inner sanctum... oops!

Ane Mari went shopping for some material to make clothes with, and since it was the Holi festival celebrating the end of the "winter" season, we got pink gulal herbal powder smeared all over ourselves in traditional fashion by locals who ran a fabric shop. This stuff stains pretty heavily, and the powder that got into Ane Mari's hair didn't fully wash off until a month or so later! Back at the hotel, we tried to scrub off the pink gulal, but ended up catching the bus to Pondicherry with pink stains on our clothes, face and hair. Oh well, we did as the locals do!

We arrived at the former French-controlled city of Pondicherry at about 6:00 a.m. Although it was a French colony from the 18th century up until fifty or so years ago, the French architecture, street names and "Hotel de Ville" (City Hall) of Pondicherry still remain. We walked up to the Gandhi statue and enjoyed the peaceful early morning serenity as we continued on. We noticed

that the Indian police here still wore the French red "kepi" hats, which looked odd, but original and interesting.

We then visited the crowded Sri Aurobindo Ashram, founded by the man who preached a philosophy that combined yoga and modern science. After he died, he passed his spiritual authority to a French woman simply known as "The Mother", and both of them are buried in the Samadhi (a tomb that is covered with flowers and is venerated like shrine) on the grounds of the ashram. In 1968, "The Mother" founded an international community "belonging to no country in particular" and based on alternative technology and agriculture called Auroville, which we stopped in for a bit.

From there, we got on a bus to Mamallapuram (also known as Mahabalipuram) and caught a little boy red-handed in the process of trying to steal Ane Mari's video camera! Her opened bag was pulled by his tiny hands under her seat, and looking like he was four to six years old, he was clearly told to do so by two women nearby, one of whom was holding a baby, who oversaw the "operation". The small boy began to cry when Ane Mari caught him, and it was obviously not his idea to do it. The anger was then focused on the two women, whom we both felt to be raising a young child in such a terrible way (then probably that baby as well)! Both were clad in very nice saris and gold jewelleryes, but the one who was likely the boy's mother had the nerve to scold and slap him in front of everyone, apologizing to Ane Mari with a lame "Sorry madam", and then giggling as though it was all a funny little mistake! The rest of the crowd on the bus sided with us and the conductor threw them out on the side of the highway in the middle of nowhere. Although children generally looked up to their parents, we could only hope that the incident made the poor

little boy aware that what mommy was teaching him was wrong. However, he was too young to be able to realize that he would probably grow up to become a well-seasoned thief.

Having checked into the Lakshmi Lodge, we paid a visit to the nearby “Little Flowers” orphanage, where the children were unbelievably sweet and polite. It was run by a very Catholic “Sister” (a former nun) R. Stella Rosaline, a local woman who took the kids on after quitting her job as a teacher. Since another earthquake off the coast of Sumatra in Indonesia that day brought about a tsunami warning for that night (it never happened, thank goodness!), she had to take the children six kilometres away for safety. Before they left, we gave them some of our old clothing, which was likely too big, but as she said, would be fine for the older girls. We found out that there were quite a lot of orphanages in the area, and sadly enough, some of the much less reputable ones were said to be used as a front for the horrible business of child trafficking and prostitution. How disgustingly horrible!

I woke up early before Ane Mari, then went for a little walk and saw “Arjuna’s Penance” (a relief carving in solid rock based on the legends written in the books of the Hindu Panchatantra), various mandapams (pillared pavilions in front of temples, also made of rock), and the “Five Rathas” (rock-cut temples resembling chariots). I passed by all sorts of rock sculptors, and it was obvious that this town was famous for them.

The two of us ate breakfast, and then walked down to the Shore Temple, the stunning rock temple by the sea dating from the seventh century. Nearby, we met and talked to an archaeologist supervising a dig going on next to the temple. He told us that they had just found the remnants of a wall which extended past the shoreline and into

the sea, even doing underwater excavations to complete their ground-breaking findings. It is very interesting.

Packing up, we headed to Chennai, the capital city of Tamil Nadu formerly known as Madras. With only a few hours to spare before our overnight train to Hyderabad, we took an auto-rickshaw to A.V.M. Film Studios, after a man, who falsely claimed to have not eaten in two days, refused our offer of watermelon pieces, wanting money instead! They almost didn’t let us in, saying “no filming today”, but with a little bit of persistence, we saw through that excuse and got the chance to watch the filming of a commercial for some Tamil magazine. It was so cool to watch, as they used all sorts of extras, including auto-rickshaw and motorcycle drivers, in a scene where they all simultaneously rushed to a newsstand to pick up their copies of this periodical.

Not having a chance to see the historic “Georgetown”, the Fort and the famous High Court building of Chennai, we got on the train, which left just after six. We secured our places on upper berths, and after having dinner, I looked all over for a garbage can in which to get rid my paper containers. The guys below us told me to simply throw it out from the window, so we both made a huge fuss about their lack of environmental concern, and got out to throw it out in a can on the platform of the next train stop. Hopefully we made our point that environmental responsibility is everybody’s problem, especially in a country of over one billion people.

We both slept pretty well and had fun with some kids who initially held out their hands in an attempt to get some money from us. I felt that giving money to children would encourage them to beg instead of going to school, so we played with them instead, and they eventually forgot about

the coins they were told to get from us foreigners. After passing the sister city of Secunderbad station, we arrived at Hyderabad station and luckily found an auto-rickshaw driver who was willing to take us on an entire day tour of the city for only 300 rupees. What a deal!

Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh state, is a very Muslim city, dating back from 1512 when Sultan Quli Qutb Shah seized control from the Bahamani Dynasty, and the local language is Telugu. It was amazing how after simple overnight train ride, we were in an area with a completely different language, culture and religion! The climate was much hotter too, which was especially noticeable. The first stop was the Salar Jung Museum, which housed a collection of 35,000 artefacts assembled by Mir Yusaf Ali Khan (a.k.a. Salar Jung III), but it wasn't even open until 10:00 a.m. ! So he took us to the Charminar (or "Four Towers"), built in 1591 to commemorate a devastating epidemic in Hyderabad, and has now become the symbol of the city. The second floor happens to also be home to the oldest mosque in the city.

Passing by the busy bazaars (including the bustling Laad Bazaar), all very Muslim in nature, including the heart of the country's pearl trade, perfumeries, silk and sari merchants, there was Nizam Chowmahalla's Palace, which was not open to visitors. Continuing on, we went to Mecca Masjid, apparently the sixth largest mosque in India, capable of housing up to 10,000 worshippers. Many of the bricks above the gate are said to contain soil from the Muslim holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, hence the name of the mosque. Also on the compound are the tombs of the members of the Nizam clan, which an old man tried to explain to us who was in each tomb, albeit incomprehensibly.

Off to Golconda Fort next, which was huge and was constructed from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries A.D., at the time of the ruling of the Qutb Shah kings. When Sultan Quli Qutb Shah, a Turkoman from Persia and governor of Telangana, declared independence, Golconda became his capital. It remained so for 78 years until it was moved to present day Hyderabad. The Fateh Darwaza ("Victory Gate") entrance is made of teak. Ingenious acoustics were designed so that a loud clap there could be heard at the top of the fort, which was cool when we tried it out. The guides there called it an "ancient telephone", but it actually served as a warning system in case the enemy approached. The heat and sun were so strong that we had to stop quite often for refreshment breaks. The water supply was brought in by a sophisticated system of glazed earthenware pipes. Various mosques dominated the top, with surprisingly, a Hindu temple (Makakali Temple) there along with them! Durbar Hall at the summit provided a beautiful view of the entire city.

Back down at the bottom, passing through the "harem" and Rani Mahal with its Royal Baths, we noticed that many bats had decided to make the ceiling their home. Continuing on to the Qutb Shahi Tombs, I couldn't help but think that the 10 tombs there all looked like mini Taj Mahals, which is located in the city of Agra in the north of India, and is a Muslim tomb. After looking into a few of them, they all started to look like the same after a while. Since the adjoining museum was closed, we went back to the city, towards Tank Bund Road (colloquially known as "Necklace Road") that encircles Hussain Sagar, the artificial lake which, ironically enough, had a huge stone Buddha in the middle of it! At 17.5 metres and 350 tonnes, this statue of Buddha Purnima ("Full Moon Buddha") sank whilst being transported in 1990, taking eight people with it. It was salvaged from the bottom intact (!) and re-erected in 1992.

Apparently Andhra Pradesh played an important role in the history of Buddhism, since the earliest historical accounts of the state dated back to the 3rd century B.C., during the time of Ashoka, the Great Mauriyan king, during whose reign Andhra Pradesh became an important Buddhist centre. Buddhist influences can still be found today in Amaravathi and Nagarjunakonda, one of the greatest archaeological sites in India.

Passing by Indira Gandhi Park and 35 statues of people who played a significant role in Andhra Pradesh state over the years, we stopped at a memorial where we had to take off our shoes and burned our feet silly walking on it. Returning quickly, we skirted past Lumbini Park (same name as the place Buddha was born in Nepal as well as the huge urban park in Bangkok), which has boats that take people to the Buddha statue and back, and went over to the Venkateswara (or Birla Mandir), a stunning white marble temple with an ornately-carved ceiling. Being rewarded with nice views of Hyderabad, we were even able to see as far as Golconda Fort, where we were at earlier.

Later on, in the public gardens, there was a Health Museum which showed displays on nutrition (as well as deficiencies), along with infectious diseases. Ane Mari got in trouble when she was filming the dead foetuses, some of which had two heads and other bizarre defects, preserved in jars of formaldehyde. Skipping the archaeological museum right across the gardens, we asked the driver to take us back to Hyderabad station in Nampally. We then looked for and found a place to stay, then fell asleep after a good meal, sending e-mails and calling our loved ones during their Easter holidays back home.

We met a guy named Santosh Lohiya, who took us through the very wealthy area of Banjara Hills to a yet-to-be-finished, beautiful castle-like

villa on top of a hill. The tents of peasants, likely those of the builders and their families, were situated right next to it, which provided a stark but disturbing contrast. That hill overlooked the H.I.T.E.C. (Hyderabad Information Technology Engineering Consulting) City, home to a plethora of international software companies who've taken advantage of India's highly educated, skilled and qualified, not to mention lower-paid, workforce. Ironically, with the tents right in view, this promise of "well paid" jobs and access to "global markets" has made these poor, many of whom don't even have access to clean water and electricity, let alone high-tech electronic gadgets, proverbially left well behind.

On top of everything he had done for us, Santosh then generously took us out to lunch, then to the pool of Taj Residency Hotel (the same company that owns the luxuriously Taj Mahal hotel in Mumbai), where he is a member, then went back to his family. I was pretty amazed that the only Indian person we saw there, apart from Santosh, was the pool attendant, as everyone else was white. It all made me somewhat uncomfortable, especially considering that I was in India.

Dropping us off at the bus station, we headed back to Mumbai, and since Ane Mari had fortunately got some modelling work to do early the next morning, I decided to go on a local bus tour of the city. Seeing many of the same places I did at the beginning of the trip, but also others I hadn't visited, it was all in Hindi, with one guy translating in English for me. I bought a big bag of dried chana (chick pea) snacks for a girl selling garlands of flowers at the Gateway of India and her friend. They both ate them hungrily, poor things. They stood in such stark contrast to the overtly-opulent Taj Mahal Hotel next to them.

At the National Gallery of Modern Art,

there was a cool installation piece on the dhobi ghats (the laundry service), which involved white sheets on horizontally-laid television screens, which depicted video footage of the real thing. Continuing on north, we stopped at the Taraporevala Aquarium, which was quite dilapidated, but was interesting to learn about the species of fish found in India. It seemed like a standard group tour stop, as it was so crowded.

Passing by the famous Chowpatty Beach, I was impressed with how clean it looked given its reputation for being dirty. Drove up to the wealthier area of Malabar Hill, with its colonial architecture, also mentioned in the writings of Salman Rushdie, and saw a big Jain temple. Stopped at the Pherozesha Mehta (or “Hanging”) Garden, where bushes sculpted into animals predominated. On the other side, Kamala Nehru Park offered a nice view of Chowpatty Beach below.

Nearby was the Parsi “Tower of Silence” where these people lay out their dead to be picked apart by vultures and then rot naturally, according to their custom. The Parsis are a remnant of the great Persian Empire, which is now modern day Iran. Followers of the Persian prophet Zoroaster, their ancestors were driven out of Persia by invading Muslims 1400 years ago. Some, known as Irani, took refuge in the desert. Others, later joined by the Irani, fled to Gujarat in north India. These Indian Zoroastrians are termed Parsis. Unfortunately, lacking vultures in Mumbai sometimes makes them resort to chemical means to decompose the bodies at the Towers of Silence, since fire, earth and water are sacred, ruling out burial and cremation as other feasible options.

There was constant pointing out of where certain famous Hollywood stars lived, then we stopped at Mahalaxmi Temple, but it wasn’t at

all the same without my dear friends this time around. Continued onto Bandra and Juhu beach, sampling their famous dishes of bhel puri and pani puri, wetting my feet and getting a young girl to give me a beautiful henna tattoo on my left arm, complete with flowers, vines and an “Om” symbol (also spelled “Aum”, it is a Sanskrit word used by Hindu yogis to represent a vibration which they say pervades the entire universe). Once the tour finished, I finally met up with Ane Mari.

She was quite tired after the ridiculously early photo shoot, but it was good to see her. The last couple of days in Mumbai involved seeing a photographic exhibition called “Exhibit A”, put on by the Photographers Guild of India, shopping for food and presents in places like the Chor Bazaar (“Thieves’ Market”) to bring back as well as going for a couple of more film castings.

Ane Mari had a meeting with one particular casting director, so I went to the Mani Bhavan, the house where Mohandas Karamchand “Mahatma” Gandhi stayed at whilst he was in Mumbai (then Bombay) from 1917 to 1934. Not only was there a museum about his life, but there were photographs, memorabilia of the simple possessions he had (tea thermos, robe, simple sandals and a spinning wheel for making yarn), quotes of his displayed everywhere and a library of books about non-violence downstairs. In January 1948, before the three pistol shots that put an end to his life, Gandhi had been on the political stage for more than fifty years. He had inspired two generations of Indian patriots, shaken a mighty British empire and sparked off a revolution which was to change the face of Asia and Africa, and some may say, even America, as his principles of non-violence inspired the Reverend Martin Luther King Junior to kick off the Civil Rights movement in the United States.

To millions of his own people, he was the “Mahatma”, (“the Great Soul”), whose sacred glimpse was considered a reward in itself. By the end of 1947 he had lived down much of the suspicion, ridicule and opposition which he had to face, when he first raised the banner of revolt against racial exclusiveness and imperial domination. His ideas, once dismissed as quaint and utopian, had begun to strike chords in some of the finest minds of the world. During World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had called him “The Naked Fakir” and did not want to yield to any of India’s wishes for independence, not believing that he was a genuine threat to the “Jewel of the British Empire”. But the likes of Albert Einstein had said in July of 1944 that “Generations to come, it may be, will scarcely believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon earth.” I too couldn’t believe what a great man he was, a lawyer turned “simple man”, non-violently protesting British rule and almost single-handedly spear-heading the independence movement in India. In addition to this, he fasted for weeks at a time, led long marches (such as that to protest the unfair salt tax), still kept fervently at his cause, even AFTER his wife Kasturba (and dear secretary) died while being interred by the British in the city of Pune, and even had pity for his murderer while he was dying of his gunshot wounds! I bought many books on his life for my friends and myself, and left there feeling completely uplifted.

On the second last night in Mumbai, I followed some intense rhythmic sounds to their source, only to find celebrations going on for the “Sai Baba” festival. Sai Baba of Shirdi (in Maharashtra state) was an unknown, young bearded man who took refuge in a mosque at the beginning of the 18th century, and the legend has it, that nobody knew from whence he came. His simple language of expressions and unique special

powers of solving the problems of the needy, poor and destitute made him gain quite the following, making Shirdi a site of pilgrimage, and earning him the name of Sri Sai Baba. The festival itself was amazing, with people dancing, music playing, and positive atmosphere everywhere.... I had to go back and get Ane Mari! We loved it, dancing with everyone, then getting invited to the temple, where we were given “offerings” of flowers and coconuts, plus getting a garland of blooms each around our necks. It felt like pure love from total strangers! We left there feeling so positive and were invited back for food the next night, which was, conveniently enough, right before our flight back.

We got to the airport, and then flew to Sri Lanka and onwards to Hong Kong. Meeting up with Kasia later on when she finally decided to come back to H.K. at the end of May, we found out that she stayed at the ashram for three weeks, got the Hindu spiritual name “Shakti” given to her, then went on to Delhi, where she got a bunch of modelling jobs and studied at the Sivananda Centre. For me, 2005 was definitely a year where the learning processes were a lot more intense than in recent memory, and this trip to India was definitely a huge part of that. Next time, it’ll be on to the north of the country, which is said to be a completely different world from the south. For now though, I’ll just have to be content with waiting to one day see exactly how true this really is for me...

(校對：倪明威、黃海星)