

The journal travel page

PRUE AND GLENN

It didn't quite pan-out the way we first planned.

And certainly that part of India travelled by Prue and I turned out to be nothing like I'd imagined.

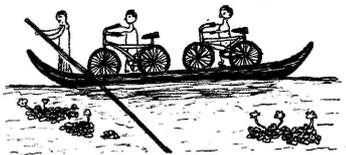
At the start, we saw the sort of thing most people think of as 'real India' – the city of Madurai, with its magnificence and wealth sitting alongside grinding poverty. Because we'd several days to pass before joining our group back where we'd landed at Trivandrum, we took the return train trip. And after a couple of days in Madurai, those other big Indian cities hold minimal further appeal for me at least.

Yet back in the Keralan resort of Kovalam, sheer magic awaited. As waves lashed up on the rocks below the terraces of our base hotel - a comfortable establishment of old-world charm – a mosque looking like something out of Arabian Nights rose from a headland through the palm leaves. In the opposite direction, a lighthouse stood out.



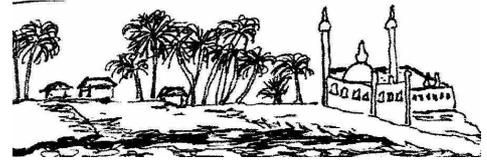
Our adventure exploring the Kerala Backwaters began with the appearance of Koshy - the young Indian man who was to be our guide for the next 12 days - closely followed by our 13 fellow travellers arriving either in the main group from Heathrow or from other parts of India.

From there, we headed north up the coast for our first night out to be spent on four converted rice boats with their combined crew of seven who cooked delicious meals and sang boating songs. From temples, mosques and Christian churches along the waterways, sounds of the faithful being called to prayer and rock music seemed to echo from nowhere. Simple homesteads and the neat gardens of subsistence farmers came into focus as we travelled the backwaters, where the main mode of travel is – you guessed it – by boat.



Children are 'bussed' to their studies on the 'school boat', calling and waving as they go. Others walk along narrow towpaths as substantial canoes paddle past with cash crops of bananas, coconuts and coir. Even garbage is collected this way and bicycles cross the water two-by-two, making longer journeys easier. In the village at the centre of the coir industry, resort guests also have to be ferried from the reception and dining areas to their rooms.

Everyone washes in the clear waters and young women don't even lift the hems of their gaily coloured saris as they scrub clothes and linen amid the rocks. There's no need: Everything dries quickly in the hot sun. Older folk go slowly about their business under the palms.

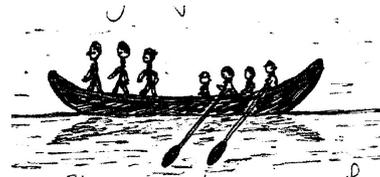


Despite having so little in material terms, these people seem fastidious, industrious and – most of all - happy. The real highlight for me was our stay at the home of a local family with Prue and two other tour members. We were guests of Thomas, the rice farmer who – purely by accident – pioneered such 'home stays' in the area some 18 years ago.

A boatload of Swedish tourists found themselves doubled-booked in the nearest town. Since it was a very long ride to the next hotel possibility, they begged a night's shelter and food. Initially, the villagers refused. "We'd made no preparations and also we were a bit frightened," Thomas admits. But the children were crying, the parents distraught - so Thomas and several neighbours relented. Meals were somehow produced and the unexpected guests accommodated.

Like many Keralans, Thomas and family are members of the Syrian Orthodox Church, although they follow local custom such as the practice of 'arranged' marriage. Many Christian denominations, Jews, Muslims and the Hindu majority all live happily alongside each in Kerala, which claims one hundred per cent literacy.

Even his two under-five daughters speak English, yet the family still lives the simple life, most of their food and health remedies coming from the garden and paddy fields beyond. Two of their rooms are let to seasonal visitors looking for this special experience and Thomas's mother creates deliciously mild curries for them, even demonstrating her art.

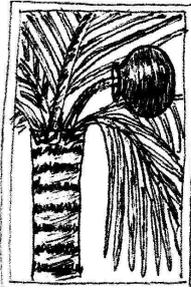


On a village walk, we traversed the surrounding paddy fields and Thomas escorted us on a sunset cruise in one of his two big canoes, before a chatty evening. After that warm and rare insight into their lives, we were very sad to leave 'our' family behind the next day.

But now we headed for the mountains clad in banana trees and coffee bushes, stopping-off at a small rubber plantation to see the production process and lingering awhile in a small town where a fete was taking place in the presence of a magnificently bejewelled elephant and many colourful parasols.

The origin of many familiar store cupboard items was to be found at the 'spice farm' - and of course we stocked-up. For an early morning walk in Periyar's stunningly beautiful national park, we were ferried across the lake on a somewhat precarious raft. All wore protective leggings against leeches, but Prue was the only one to get bitten – on her hand.

A “Toddy” tree. The palm flower is cut and the sap from the flower is drained into a pot. The liquid is then fermented to make an alcoholic drink. Arrack which is distilled from toddy is banned in Kerala.



An eager fisherman cooked a lobster chosen by Prue for her to eat in a nearby restaurant and we admired the spectacular cantilever nets introduced by the Chinese, followed by the intricate making-up and performance of Kerala’s famous dancers. We happened on a temple ceremony at which two babies were brought – accompanied by proud relatives, bugles and drums - to taste their very first ‘solid’ food and be weighed using a massive branch of bananas. Like everyone else, we went barefoot in the holy places.

The trip to Munnar wound its way past the bright green mosaics of tea plantings - a roadside group of brightly dressed tea pickers elegantly balancing baskets on their heads. Later we dined ‘silver service’ at a former rest station, where privileged employees of the British Raj used to take leave from the sweltering cities. A couple of nights were also spent in Kochin, where we eschewed the modern city with its shops, claustrophobic traffic and luxury waterside offices and apartment buildings now taking over the skyline.

Driving around in auto-rickshaws and sipping glasses of cucumber lemonade behind swishing screens of banana leaves were among my very favourite things. Oh yes - and Ayurvedic body massage is out of this world – an incredible hour of slithering around and being slapped with oils on what looks like a giant chopping board – all for an incredible £8! And a magical boat ride among the wildlife of a peaceful waterway cost six hundred rupees.

Instead, we made our way to historic Fort Kochin, where the Roman Catholic and Syrian Orthodox cathedrals stand side-by-side. Not far away is the Jewish synagogue, established many years ago in the state capital.

Small traders and tailors dogged our footsteps, constantly trying to lure us inside their premises to look at the endless rolls of fabric they promised to make into clothes for us in the few short hours left.

OK. I’ll admit it. We went in and spent-up big, judging by the extra luggage we were forced to carry home.

Glenn Whitehead and Prue Chadderdon – both from Burton Waters -travelled together, Prue making a lasting record of their trip with tiny sketches in her diary

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