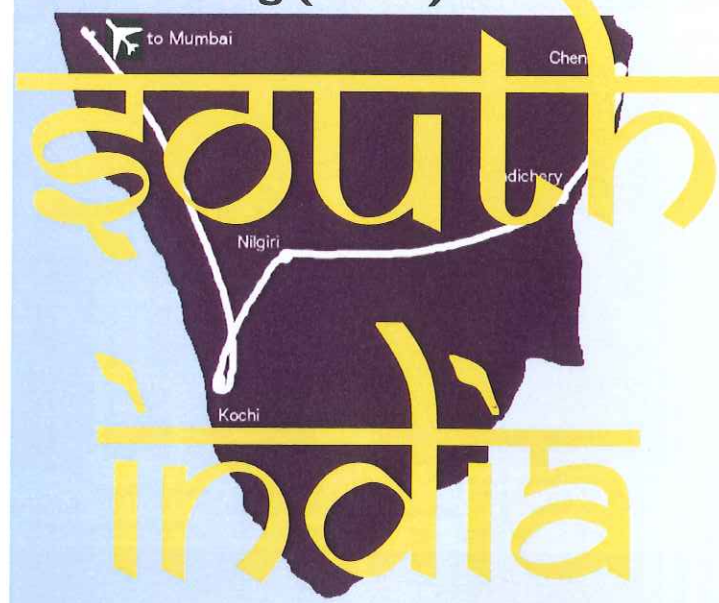


Discovering (Part I)



If you've only been to India once, it was probably to New Delhi, to Agra for the Taj Mahal, and to Rajasthan for the magic circle route through Jaipur, Jodhpur and Udaipur. But if you go a second time, as we did in February, the South Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala on the east and west sides of the southern point, are almost like another country. The Hindu temples of Tamil Nadu and the various Christian churches in Kerala typify the wonderful diversity of the country.

Many AAGP members answered our One List inquiry, but Dee Potdar was particularly helpful; she had become familiar with south India after her sister Rucha settled in Chennai. More than that, her brother-in-law Ashish Gupta had built an agency there, Milesworth Travel www.milesworth.com, with global reach. Karen plucked a list of destinations from her usual pile of guidebooks and within a few phone calls, always prompt and efficient, Ash put together a complete 20-day itinerary. At the risk of over-simplifying, a typical tour of the north is largely about the Mughal empire which ruled much of India from 1526 until 1857, reaching its zenith in the 1640s when Shah Jehan built the Taj Mahal. The two southern states where we traveled lived quite a different history. Tamil Nadu on the east had robust trade with China from the 11th to the 13th centuries. Kerala on the west sent and received expeditions from South Arabia and East Africa at least as early as the 7th century of our era.

From Heathrow we flew to Chennai (formerly Madras), the first British settlement (1639) and the fourth largest city in India, capital of its auto industry, and highly rated in various international city rankings. Ash and Rucha took us to lunch in a modern restaurant but in which meals are served on banana leaves. Aside from the obvious esthetic attraction, there are health reasons, based upon the traditional Hindu system of Ayurvedic medicine. Rice goes on the leaf, (from which it is believed the food absorbs chlorophyll) topped with your choice of chutneys and sauces and all mixed and eaten with the right hand. Ash set us up with maps, an Indian cellphone on which his company was never more than a few clicks away, and a dedicated driver.

Our visit to adjacent Mylapore, the capital of the original Tamil state, was guided by "story-teller" Akila, a former history teacher with a group called Storytales. She showed us where Christianity supposedly set foot in India in the year 52 in the person of St. Thomas the Apostle, now considered the Patron Saint of India. A beautiful white neo-gothic basilica now stands over his former grave. Syncretistic influences from Indian culture produce a sari-clad Virgin Mary, and Jesus rising above a lotus flower.

South India's major religions — Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam — live together in apparent harmony, working around each other's feast days. Especially in the month of January, before we got there, there was a feast almost every

day. Karen tried hard but barely made a dent in the 33 million Hindu deities she set out to learn about — including their many incarnations, avatars, spouses, steeds ("vehicles"), etc. I found it hard to pick them out of the teeming sculptural masses which climb up the spectacular 30-40 meter *gopurams* or temple gates which tower over most temples. But every person you talk to is ready to teach you, starting with Brahma the creator; Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer; whose stories fill volumes of Hindu scripture.



The more we saw of this religious art, the more it became a challenge to identify the beings we'd just heard about at the previous stop.

Packaged offerings of fruit and flowers were always sold outside and presented to priests and attendants inside, where statues were being painted, clothed, and/or anointed with oil, bells ringing and incense burning. Though temperatures stayed in the mid-30s we were fortunate to ride in an air-conditioned minivan. We had an average of three hours of travel between cities, with occasional strips of autoroute, but constant traffic kept our average speed around 60 kph.

I had always wanted to see Pondicherry, the center of French colonial life until joined to independent India in 1950. Mirra Alfassa, an artist and spiritualist who was born in France but



became known in South India as "The Mother," met in 1914 an important independence fighter turned yogi known as Sri Aurobindo. They formed a spiritual bond and partnership that lasted until his death in 1950.

Their association in the Sri Aurobindo society gave birth in 1968 to an experimental township 10 km from Pondicherry known as Auroville. It seems to have grown much like an Israeli kibbutz, by common labor in a cashless economy on a once-deforested sandy plateau, with spiritual and financial support from followers all over the world. We had a surprisingly tasty lunch from a big central kitchen and toured artisanal sites such as a musical instrument shop, livestock barns, a basketry shop employing local women, and showrooms for fine clothing designed and produced locally but distributed throughout the country. The *Matrimandir*, a large golden sphere fitted out inside for silent meditation marks the physical and spiritual center of the town. After Indians, the French are the next largest group of members at Auroville, which has only a fraction of the 50,000 inhabitants it was designed for. But it seems a strong surviving example of the kind of modern intentional community that goes against the mainstream.



The town of Pondicherry has a distinctly French feel, particularly in "White Town," the core of the old colony which is spotlessly clean with parks, good restaurants and gorgeous old formerly colonial government buildings. A lot of the good housing belongs to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram which has a beautiful facility in the very center. The residents apparently include a population that lives part of the year in Europe. Everywhere one sees young westerners affected by the spiritual ambience and adopting Indian clothing styles.

We joined the Sunday throngs at a local temple dedicated to

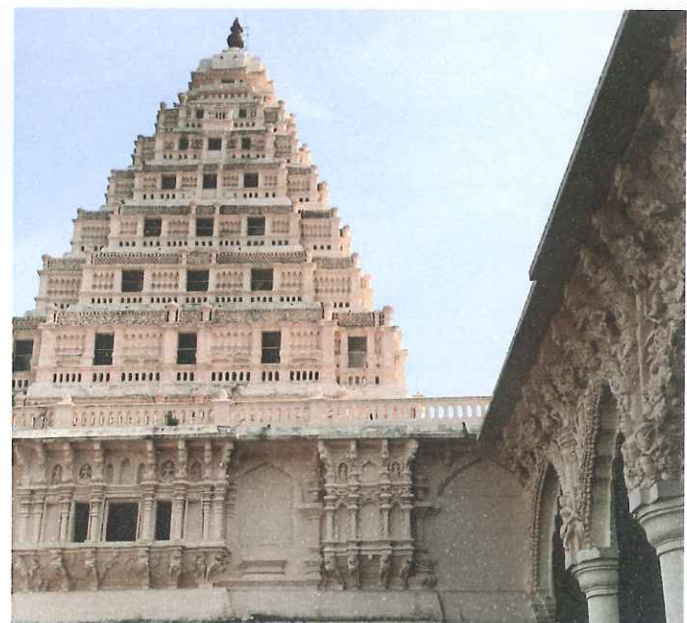


the elephant god *Ganesha* (everyone's favorite). A young couple at some stage in the long marriage process sat on the floor, looking miserable while family and friends pressed in to tie various jewelry around their heads. As always, drums and horns create a racket intended to drown out other sounds that might distract the attention of persons trying to pray.

I won't try to detail our three days of visiting UNESCO-designated temples from various powerful Tamil dynasties that spread their culture all the way across Sri Lanka, and parts of Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.



The *Thanjavur Maratha Palace*, home of a 17th century ruling family, was built in totally Indian style, but gave the feeling of European Baroque. Although we prefer to "eat it rather than sleep in it" and thus avoid high-end hotels, the agency put us in some spectacular ones, though at very reasonable rates: the Ideal Beach Resort spread out near the Shore Temples of *Mamallapuram*, and another

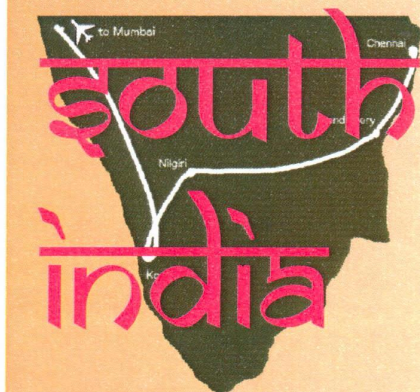


occupying the 1890s executive residence of the British thread-baron J.P. Coats high above the historic city of Madurai. The food where we stayed was always reasonably good, and often excellent. With all those great spices, our noses and tongues were fully engaged!

Robert Wildau

To be continued in the June Magazine.

Discovering (Part II)

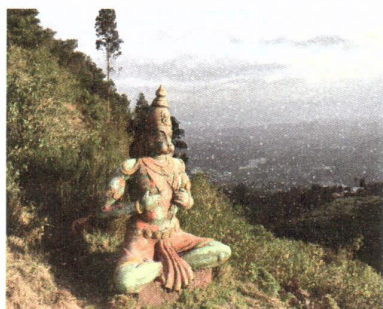


Cont'd from Robert Wildau's article on South India -Part I published in the May Magazine.

Eight days on, we finally rose out of the hot plains 1500 meters into the tea country of the *Nilgiris*, or Blue Mountains, whose main town, *Udhagamandalam* or *Ootacamund* (understandably better known as "Ooty") was the main summer "hill station" for southern India during the Raj. Our driver, known as Kooty, was masterful in passing trucks and microbuses on blind curves. We just suspended all fear and disbelief until he deposited us at the Tea Nest, nestled among the fields near Coonoor;



After lunch we went hiking through the eucalyptus forest where the local women collected the leaves and delivered them home to



a large kiln to be distilled into intensely aromatic oil. We then descended along a trail lined with various statues of the monkey-god Hanuman. After dinner we had the chance to socialize with two young couples, vacationing from Mumbai and Jaipur; and to learn about their lives. I had

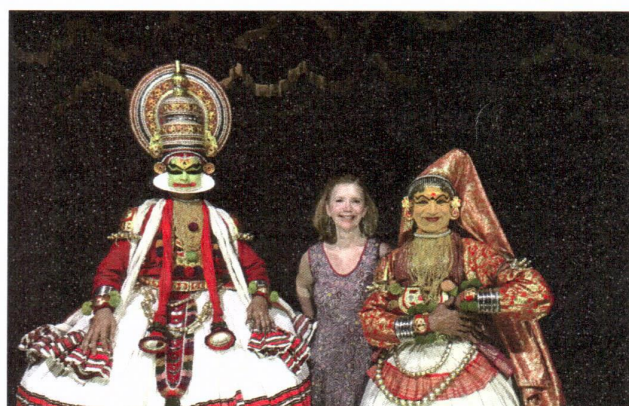
always assumed that speakers of Hindi, the main language of North India, could get along anywhere in the country. But they didn't understand any more Tamil than we did!

The next day we drove to another estate, Tranquillitea, for a wonderfully guided tour of a tea field learning how fine hand-harvesting is done (always "two leaves and a bud" at 15-day intervals) and how the tea trees have to be cut back every five years and their multiple branching induced anew. In the tasting that followed, our host was keen to show the difference between "flavor" and "body." It quickly became clear that the richness of most English tea is all body, whereas white tea is said to have the purest flavor; i.e., practically undetectable by us. The young owner served an elegant light lunch in his garden. Like many farmers

in tourist areas, he now offers home-stays in his beautiful manor house.



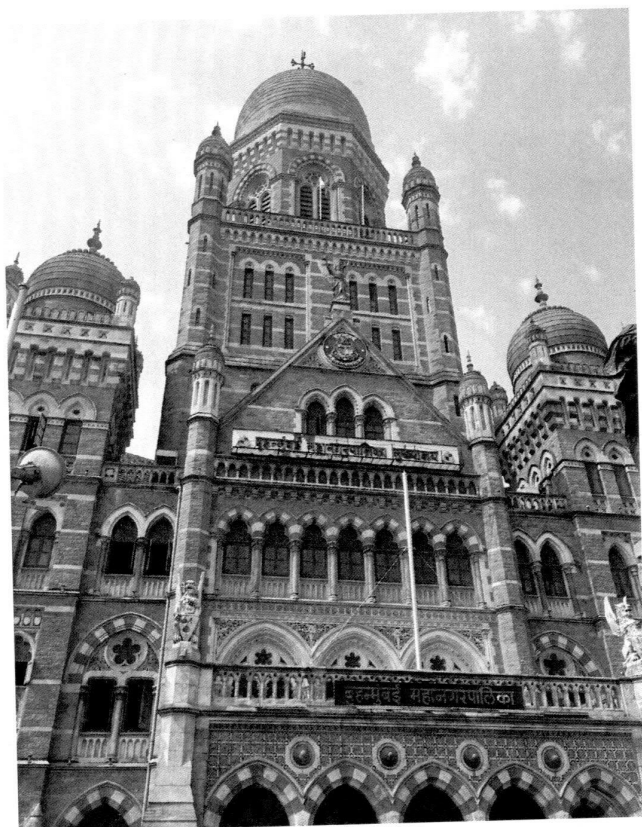
Later we took a 28 km ride downhill through wonderful tropical mountain scenery on the famous narrow-gauge cog-driven Nilgiri Mountain Railway, and the next day drove down to a larger town for a 2.5 hour train ride across the spine of South India to Fort Kochi, Kerala state, on the Spice Coast of the Arabian Sea where we met our son coming from Shanghai. Kochi is the most important city in Kerala, having traded over time with Greeks and Romans, Arabs and Chinese, and been ruled by Portuguese, Dutch, French and British. A big Jewish population thrived there in harmony with all for a thousand years until all but a handful left for Israel and the New World in the 1980s. Tourists have discovered Kerala since 2005 and triggered the gentle refurbishment of much of old Kochi; the great ancient oaks and former British parade grounds make it feel lost in time. We saw state archaeologists



supervising the restoration of St. Francis Church, the first European church in India in 1503, where Vasco de Gama was buried soon after.

Distinctive in the Kerala landscape are the "backwaters," formed by the many rivers and lakes that link the rice fields and farms. We spent one day and night cruising the area in a comfy houseboat with a superstructure of faux palm-branches. There followed two days in a farm-cum-homestay in the same area, then two days at Vanilla County, a spice and rubber plantation in the hills. The owner-family's hospitality was extraordinary. We swam in a natural rock pool and drank palm wine in a local "toddy shop" with a Swiss lady who stays at Vanilla every season. Alcohol was usually obtainable even in smaller towns, but the ambience in which it is sold and consumed tends to be illicit and seedy.

After a last night in Kochi, we parted from Milesworth Travel and flew to Mumbai for a busy two-day stay. Karen had found a great little hotel right near the famous Taj Mahal Palace Hotel,



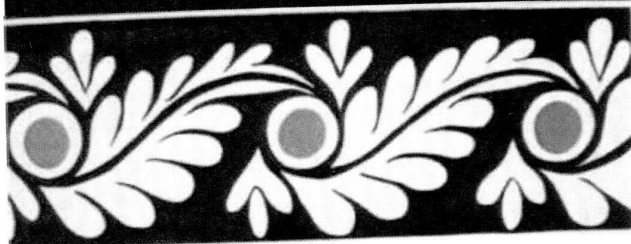
(site of the terrorist siege of 2008), which was fortunate because traffic discouraged movement very far. We visited a Jain temple, the famous Crawford Market for amazing spices and the house/museum where Mahatma Gandhi regularly stayed for 17 years during the height of the independence struggle. And the "Indo-Saracenic" Victorian architecture was mindblowing.

Our most memorable visit was a walkabout in **Dharavi**, Mumbai's largest slum, i.e. unplanned urban area, where up to a million people live, trade and do every kind of work, down to hand processing of recyclable glass and plastics, in unbelievably crowded, unhealthy and unsafe conditions. Now the underlying land has become hugely valuable, which will eventually push out today's populace in a long social and economic convulsion.

During the trip I had been reading *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, which engulfed me in the struggle in a similar environment of low-caste migrants from the countryside. The book underscored for us the psychological and spiritual character of people who can somehow accept their lot in life even though they have few good choices. Their courage, energy and generosity are what makes India special. Whether or not you ever visit there, it's a book worth reading.

Robert Wildau

Don't forget to check the magazine on-line
for full colour version!



By Hens Albarda

Three times lucky

What is it like to jump from an airplane? I decided to find out. This was in Holland. The parachute course was three days, eight jumps, license A. You jump from a tower ten meters high with a bungee cord, learning to roll over; breaking the fall. You get to fold and pack your own chute. In addition, there is a second, emergency chute a bit smaller; pre-packed.

And then the big day is there! You go up in a little plane with three or four other pupils, an instructor and a pilot. Say six in all. When the moment is there and you are scared stiff (the instructor speaks delicately of "having second thoughts") you are allowed not to jump. But once you start climbing out, there is no going back. You climb out underneath the wing. There are various struts and bars to hold on to. You have to fight a 200-km/h wind. Should you then make to come back, the instructor will wrestle you loose and physically kick you out! What they are afraid of is the chute popping out while you are still stuck to the plane. The plane would crash. It has happened.

I did three jumps and called it quits. No license A.

First jump there was no wind at all so I hit the ground without any sideways movement, not managing the intended rollover. Hurt my back.

Second jump I landed on a parked lorry. No rollover there either. Hurt myself again. These parachutes have two extra ropes, which allow for a bit of steering. Apparently I didn't do too well.

Third jump I landed in some trees. Nice and soft for a change.

Had to cut myself loose and climb down. I had to come back later with a saw. Slaughter a couple of trees. Half a day's work to get the chute back. Local farmer got compensation. Embarrassment all around.



By Anna Burns

Quick Fixes & Other Oddments

This was a recipe that I gave a couple of summers ago, but one that I have changed slightly – for the better, I hope: chickpea, fennel & onion salad.

You will need:

- 1 jar of chickpeas
- 1 fennel bulb
- 1 medium sized red or mild white onion
- 1 lemon
- A bunch of flat-leaf parsley
- Salt & pepper.

Rinse the chickpeas well in cold water & tip into a roomy plastic container. If you have one, use a mandolin to finely slice the fennel & onion into the container with the chickpeas. Add the finely grated rind of the lemon, together with its juice. Chop the parsley finely & tip into the mixture with salt & pepper to taste. Finally a good swoosh of olive oil & *voilà* – a tasty salad that accompanies anything from the BBQ & is a very good "keeper".

A friend recently sent me a YouTube film of kitchen "oddments" – my favourite being how to quickly & very simply remove the shell from a hard-boiled egg – simply pop the egg in a jar; cover with cold water & with one hand over the top of the jar; give it a vigorous shake for about 10 seconds. The shell should fall away from the egg.