

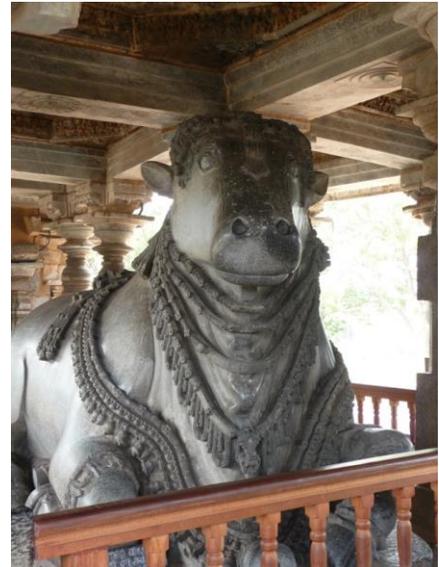
India

Willamette International Travel ◊ Trip Report ◊ April 4 – 20, 2014

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The first afternoon in **Bangalore** (Bengaluru) we toured the Lal Bagh Gardens there. This is a large botanical garden with trees and plants imported from around the world, then continued to the Bull Temple which had a huge, carved bull in black stone.

The next morning we left for about a 4 hour drive to **Hassan**, visiting a Jain temple called Shravanabelagola along the way. This temple was at the top of a huge granite outcrop, and you had to climb 712 hand-carved stairs to get to it. This is one I had to miss because I just couldn't make it. You had to go barefoot or in socks, the rocks were slick, and there were all those stairs!



We also stopped at the **Hoysaleswara Temple** at Helebid, which is a star-shaped temple, covered with beautiful carvings of Hindu gods, animals and birds. There was a temple festival going on while we were there, and this was a highlight of things to see – families were out in their best clothes, bringing flower offerings and offerings of coconuts, which were handed to priests who then smashed them open – quite a mess with coconut water and shells everywhere.



Continuing on the road, the driver just stopped by the side of the road at a random village and told us that we could get out and wander through. Again everybody who lived there was surprised to see us and the one person who spoke English asked us why we were stopping, but then proceeded to give us an impromptu tour of the town, including a visit to his own house and showing off his newborn calf.

Coorg (Kodagu) is in the hills and much cooler than lower elevations, so many resorts have been built there and Indian families go there for vacations. We stayed at the Heritage Resort which one of a chain of hotels owned by Indo-Asia Tours. It was very comfortable with individual cabanas stretching up a hill – at the top of the hill was the restaurant and pool, with fantastic views over the mountains. That evening I went to visit a different

hotel – the Orange County Hotel which was exquisite. They were built in a coffee plantation, with individual villas with plunge pools, gorgeous landscaping, 3 or 4 restaurants.

On our drive from Coorg to Mysore, we stopped at the **Namdroling Monastery**, the largest Tibetan settlement in India. The Indian government has given the Tibetan refugees some land to government autonomously – you pass over a border, go through some farmland, and come to a very large and active Tibetan monastery. It has been there since the 1950's when the refugees left Tibet.

In **Mysore**, we visited the Maharaj Palace dating back to the early 1900s, where the royal family still resides. It was a magical evening viewing the Palace when it was lit by thousands of little



lights outlining the building. On special days they light up the palace at night – we were lucky to be there for that time, so wandered around the outside in the evening with thousands of little lights outlining the building. It was a festive atmosphere, with lots of local families also out to enjoy the display. Also went to the Chamundi Temple at the top of a large hill – this was a Hindu temple. Because cows are considered sacred and can't be harmed (there are severe penalties for hitting a cow with a vehicle, and they are everywhere in India), there were lots of cows around the temple.



The next day was one of the longest drives of the trip – 5 hours from Mysore to Calicut in the northern part of the state of **Kerala**. Much of it was through mountains and a national park. Stopped at an eco-resort for lunch – this was another interesting stop because we were there on the day that Kerala celebrates new year. We were served a vegetarian feast, served on banana leaves and eaten with our hands. I couldn't really get the trick of eating rice with my fingers so I made a giant mess, but it was delicious! The resort was beautiful, with cabins scattered along a creek. It was the beginning of the monsoon season, though, so this was the place we encountered a lot of rain.

Continued down the coast the next day to **Cochin (Kochi)**, about 4 hours. Kochi is a lovely city with some unique sights. Stayed in a historic hotel called the Bruton Boatyard – this was an old boat building business transformed into a hotel. My balcony overlooked the sea, and it was really beautiful. The next morning went to the waterfront where they fish with Chinese fishing nets – these are large nets attached to a fixed platform, like a pier jutting out into the sea. Then several men raise and lower the nets, catching whatever happens to be swimming by at the time. These aren't used anywhere else in the world except Kochi and in China. Kochi was a city where there were lots of influences, so we visited a Dutch Palace, the Episcopal Cathedral, the Roman Catholic Cathedral (where Vasco da Gama the Portuguese trader is buried). That evening attended a Kathakali dance, a unique costumed dance style native to Kerala.



The next day was spent traveling south from **Kochi to Alleppey** where we boarded a house boat and had a day trip on the backwaters. These are canals that come in from the sea, lined with houses and lots of little boats. You can stay on some of the boats for an overnight. The last night was at the coconut Lagoon Hotel—this was very nice, out on an island with individual cottages with outdoor showers.



It was interesting going back to India after not having been there in 20 plus years. It has changed drastically – there are signs everywhere of an improving economy--the infrastructure is much improved, and there is clearly a rising middle class. However, there is still a lot of litter and garbage everywhere, and we still did see people farming with ox-drawn plows.

I found Southern India fascinating and so different from Delhi and the North, it seemed like a separate country. The thing I like about India is the variety – there are so many religions, languages, and landscapes (everything from high mountains to deserts to tropics) that you could visit lots of different areas there without seeing the same thing.

For more photos from Pam's amazing trip, check out the gallery on our blog:
<http://wittravel.wordpress.com/gallery/india/>