



Cinda Hunter

Kerala, Goa, Jaipur & Jodhpur



I have been to India many times over the years but this was my first trip to southern India and I decided to brave the heavier tourist areas of Kerala and Goa (in addition to my usual Jaipur, Jodhpur and Delhi where I usually buy jewellery, antique furniture and textiles) to see if there was anything new and exciting to buy for my shop.

It was an interesting trip!

KERALA

Kerala is a province of India in the far South West. It is famed as the source of Ayurvedic practices as well as for its lakes, canals and "backwater" lagoons running inland. Most of the province is below sea level and there are narrow strips of land filled with villages between the waterways and the flooded paddies where one of the main crops, rice, is grown. In the backwater areas most people use the waterways to move about and I had heard about the extraordinary "Kettuvalam" boats, previously used to transport produce, which were now mainly newly made as pleasure houseboats for tourists.

Kerala: Kettuvalam



This has created a huge new industry for boat builders and tour companies. The boats are still made the traditional way with lengths of jackfruit wood joined together without any nails at all. They use rope and a "glue" and waterproof coating made from the outside shell of cashew nuts. The roof structures are extraordinary – made from flat bamboo woven into a mat-like form, they bear some resemblance to the lines of the Sydney Opera House! Each boat's roof is unique. The boats have from 2 to 6 cabins, air-conditioned if you choose, with en suite shower and loo. There is a roofed front dining and sitting area and some of the very superior boats even have an upstairs verandah under the roof. The boat has a driver, guide and cook to look after you. My boat cost \$300 for the night I stayed on it and was very worthwhile!

The boat or "Kettuvalam", was lovely and the trip through the lake and canals from Kumarakom to Alleppey, past small villages and homes, was wonderful. You got a real feel for village life as you watched women wash clothes or men suds up and wash themselves off (in not too clean water I might add! Drinking water has to be brought in for them!) The open lake is filled with birds, water hyacinth and assorted), ferries, people travelling in tiny canoes from village to village (and hooking onto any motorised boat going in their direction for a tow) as well as assorted fishing boats, shellfish and mollusc divers, sand divers etc. The fishermen use canoes, occasionally with a basic small square sail which they rig to travel over the open lake. Others moor a canoe

and on a deep breath, go down to the lake bottom to collect molluscs. Others do much the same thing to make a living from collecting sand from the bottom of the lake which they pile on their canoes and take to the villages to sell. I spent a lovely day and night, watched the dawn in the morning and then headed back slowly before driving back to Fort Cochin.



Kerala: Fisherman



Kerala: Fishing boat



Kerala: Sand-divers

Fort Cochin was definitely the highlight of Kerala. Situated at the mouth of the river that flows into the sea, it is a huge and very old sea port. It is picturesque and interesting mainly because of its history and the various Colonial influences in the architecture. This is along the famed and evocative sounding Malabar Coast, where spices enticed traders supposedly from King Solomon's time, around 972 BC. It was most famous for "black gold" or pepper, which is still traded extensively at local auctions.

Fort Cochin was colonized by the Portuguese in the 1500's and they were followed by the Dutch in 1663 and then the British in 1795. Many Indians in this region have Portuguese surnames and it is a strongly Christian area so first names abound with Biblical references! There are some interesting churches – the oldest dating back to the Dutch in the early 1500's. Vasco da Gama was buried here before his body was taken back to Lisbon much later. This church still has "Punkahs", huge cloth "fans" which are still operated by Punkah Wallahs who pull on ropes which move the cloth to create a breeze in the church during services!



Fort Cochin from the water



Black pepper warehouse, Fort Cochin



Matovans: Fort Cochin

The oldest part of Fort Cochin is the area known as Jew Town, which dates back to the 1st C AD and which was augmented in the 16th C by a large influx of Jews escaping the Inquisition. This is interesting historically, but is sadly tumbledown and equally full of tourist traps and Kashmiri touts and compared to the rest of India, prices are very high here! I did see some wonderful, huge old matovans but they were way too expensive to bring back for resale.



The harbour is at the mouth of the river and has extraordinary fishing nets operating along the water's edge, the design of which was brought to the Malabar Coast B.C. by the Chinese. These are wooden rigging structures built along the edge of the river from which the cantilevered nets hang. They are lifted in and out of the water by a system of stone weights and pulleys. The current draws the fish through the nets. This also attracts the local dolphins (who are too smart to get tangled in the nets) and birds (mainly crows) who feed around the edges. Fishermen sell fresh fish and shellfish here and will cook your choice over a fire for a minimal fee. While quietly contemplating the harbour scene, I was approached by a vendor selling opium. Definitely a different world....

GOA

Goa is quite far north along the coast from Kerala and I saved time by flying there. Like Kerala, there is a strong Portuguese Colonial influence here. Apart from interesting architecture, it is heavily Christian (churches abound) and many locals speak Portuguese and have names like de Sousa! Goa is famed for its beaches, its trance parties and its markets during "the season" (Nov to April). It was the latter, which supposedly attracts traders from all over India, that I had mainly come to see.

This is a weird place, filled with contrasts. In between the small villages which have some lovely, if usually dilapidated, Colonial style houses mouldering in the jungle, there are still small patches of bush/forest which are frequently interspersed with open ground edged with palm trees. Some of these areas are rice paddies used only for crops during monsoon season, but now, in the long dry "winter" season, bone dry and crispy on the edges. They still have a few dry looking and disconsolate water buffalo grazing in them.... I saw some really beautiful old houses and properties and I even thought briefly that I could understand people retiring or spending a few months of the year here.

Then you hit the main tourist areas of Baga and Calangute and the beaches and the illusion of a semi-rural idyll is destroyed. At this point I had to wonder why on earth people would choose to come here! The guide books do tell you that this part of Goa is touristy and they kid you not. It is wall to wall shops, restaurants, boarding houses and people on the main roads.

On all the tourist beaches in Goa, there is an endless stream of people walking past trying to sell you everything from tiger balm to massages (fortunately if they are too persistent they are kicked off the beach, so they do move on after "no" – a shake of the head causes great confusion in India as here it can mean yes – unfortunately this means you cannot even read a book as you are too busy with the "no's"!) Men in India generally stare (hard and long and very pointedly) at white women. They do not change their patterns here in Goa and you can imagine how disconcerting it is to be stared at by men who literally stop next to your sun lounger to look their fill!



Beach scene Goa (looks a LOT better than it is)

The beach is even worse. At least there is sand, although it is hidden somewhere under endless rows of beach shack bars. Consider a 10km stretch of beach with one shack every 10m. The shacks are temporary structures built of poles, woven palm to form mats and palm or thatch roofing. Under the covered area they have a basic kitchen and tables and chairs for eating. Out front they have beach reclining beds set up under umbrellas. At the most popular locations there are 6-8 rows in front of each shack filled with lolling people - Indian as well as foreign tourists. This overflows out of the shacks where the worst of the world seems to be cooking itself to cancerous red in full sun next to its turf-demarcating umbrella. When you add jet-skis and motorboat joy rides, mainly utilized by the teenage Indian male tourists you can understand my disenchantment.

Shops here mainly open after lunch, get busy after 4pm and stay open until 11pm so to kill some time one morning, I decided to go to a different village/beach, one that is recommended as one of the more beautiful ones in Goa. For a beach famed in the guidebooks for beauty, for being off the beaten track and where the Olive Ridley Turtles come to lay, I was astounded at the level of tourist activity, plus the ubiquitous beach shacks and traders. The beaches I have seen in this part of Goa are not exciting - generally long and flat expanses of sand backed by a few sparse palm trees. The beaches themselves have a lot of titanium and washed down topsoil from the rivers and are dirty looking. There is absolutely no life to be seen in any rock pools (piles of lava volcanic rock dotted here and there along the coastline) no shells (old or new) washed up on the beaches. The sea is not clear or particularly clean as a lot of huge rivers wash out along this coast. I was quite reluctant even to have a dip! We are VERY spoiled with our beautiful beaches in South Africa.

The best part of the trip was winding through the back roads of Goa. I got a ride on the back of a motorbike, which is always fun. Especially lively here as the roads are very narrow and the tar drops off about a foot onto the gravel sides. Now think trucks, cars, mini-buses, elephants, water buffalo and masses of people both local and wobbly foreigners (some geriatric) from both directions all trying to pass anything slow moving. Add to this some devilish traffic calming devices (triple humps, big long humps, troughs in the road) plus the potholes, ruts and loose gravel and you have an idea of how "interesting" this kind of trip can be....

Goa is full of old and middle-aged British tourists, mainly it seems from Manchester. Men sport tattoos, beer bellies, speedos and sailor caps and the women only wear bikinis, many just the bottom (bear in mind that most are into their 60's). Not pretty, even the leering local men don't stop for long. I suspect the younger crowd is mainly here in December and by January there are only a few under 30. These were mainly Russians (beautiful) sporting slinky long boots (even on the beach) as well as quite a lot of Israelis, many just out of the army, the girls in full dreadlock/hippy-stone-age-wild woman wardrobe (skin and animal hair strips attached strategically all over plus biker boots....)

The famous Goa market that I had come to see was also a huge disappointment. The most exciting thing there was a man from Karnataka, both he and his "fortune-telling" cow colourfully dressed for the day. Pretty much everything else there could have been bought readily and more cheaply in the Janpath in the main tourist street in Delhi!

While I went to a couple of stunning and imaginatively laid out restaurants, the food was nothing special. Perhaps because the peak December season is over, Goa seems tired, sad, flat and a little desperate. The famous Tito's nightclub seemed to be dead - I never saw anyone going in and never came across one of the infamous Goa trance parties that supposedly abound here! Everyone seems to be in bed by 11pm!



Goa: fortune-telling cow

RAJASTHAN AND DELHI (again).

Rajasthan and Delhi are my usual hunting grounds on buying trips for jewellery, furniture and textiles in India, so while it is always fun, there is not much new to tell, but there is humour to be found at every turn in India....

January-February is the end of winter in India and usually Delhi is a little chilly but nothing serious. This year there was a freak weather system that went through China (killing quite a lot of people) the Himalayas and Northern India. Jaipur and Jodhpur were Jo'burg-in-winter cold. This caused huge consternation as everyone had to go out and buy jerseys, coats, big woolly shawls and blankets, not to mention the rush on heaters! Bizarre furry hats that looked like dead animals were excavated from the depths of cupboards to adorn the old men on motor-bikes, but it was the animals whose sartorial splendour had me enthralled. The goats in Jaipur and Jodhpur got to wear t-shirts and jerseys to ward off the cold, but in Delhi they only got sacks. The most superior girls I saw, however, were wearing green tinsel belts as a stylish accessory. Very India. The fashion show in Delhi also gave us the oxen that pull the carts wearing very fancy scarves wrapped around and between their two horns as a very fetching turban. They all seemed to be similarly attired so it is clearly the thing. Perhaps they get matching coats at night.... The camels and elephants are still having to make do with their meagre skins, the camels even get some of the hair shorn off in geometric and floral relief designs. The ellies of course always have very jolly painting, but I do think they might have appreciated a giant woolly muffler....



Jaipur: Block printing



Jodhpur: TukTuk



Jodhpur: Camel cart



Traffic scenes

Jodhpur also offered me a "life" experience this trip. I have mentioned the traffic in India previously and Jodhpur is no different. The roads are scattered with wandering (and dead) dogs and cattle. There is no such thing as your side of the road or passing only one vehicle at a time - they pass three abreast with you coming at them the other way. The roads are filled with bicyclists, motor-bicyclists, bicycle rickshaws and motor-bike rickshaws (tuktuks), delivery tuktuks, carts full of goods pulled by oxen, camels or elephants, cars, 4x4s, buses and huge Tata trucks. Imagine all of this happening both ways at the same time with no regards for one side of the road. Now think of Jodhpur in a bizarre cold spell where for the first time in memory it is like Johannesburg in winter, around 4 degrees C at night, excluding wind-chill, which is formidable. Not prepared for this, I have been wearing thin linen trousers, wool socks in my ballet shoes, two cashmere jerseys (thin, but fairly warm) and a very thin pashmina. Generally I am adequately warm, but nights are not fun.

On this day I had been collected in a car in the afternoon to go to a textile dealer who is about 30 minutes from the hotel, outside Jodhpur on the edges of the Thar desert. We work away and finally at 10pm I finish. There is much muttering and goings on as they had forgotten I would need the car to get back to town and they had sent it with the driver to deliver a last minute order to customers staying far into the desert at a Heritage hotel and it was not expected back for another 2 hours. There is no such thing as a taxi at night in the desert. The only option is for me to get a ride on the back of a motorbike back to Jodhpur....

I regularly catch a ride on the back of a bike during my travels - I have done this in Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and most recently in Goa, no problem, but these are not cold places. They lent me a scarf to tie around me head and lower face with the addition of my sunglasses (now very incognito). I wrapped myself in my pashmina, pulled on my backpack and they leant me an extra shawl all around and off we went. I lost track of my knees and hands after the first couple of minutes and fortunately being so cold I was hiding behind the driver of the bike. I say fortunately as every time I opened my eyes or caught a glimpse around his head, all I could see were huge glaring lights bearing down on us from the huge Tata trucks - sometimes two abreast - coming right at us, horns on full blast. This does not include what we might happen to be passing at the same time (camel/elephant carts, stray cattle, buses....) There is also the unexpected swerving that is required to avoid piles of boulders that have slid haphazardly into the roads where they are building drainage tunnels. The smells are indescribable, even in the cold, but the overriding odour is cowshit mixed with exhaust fumes. It seemed to go by a lot quicker than I remembered. Not sure if I was entirely conscious the whole way and if not how I stayed on, although my hands were frozen into a rictus, so it is possible....