



# Buying passage in India

BY SHELLEY WOOD

In a bid to blend in, our correspondent dons a *salwar kameez*

**B**efore I set off for southern India on my own, I had been advised by a travel-wise friend that what I wore was crucial. "Dress as they do," she advised. "The women will be more inclined to accept you, while the men will be less inclined to assume that you've just stepped out of a James Bond film and enjoy being fondled on the open street."

A *sari*? I couldn't imagine negotiating foreign toilets (or lack thereof) while swathed in complicated yards of silk. The easier option, my friend told me, is a *salwar kameez*: billowing pants (the *salwar*) worn under a tailored smock (the *kameez*) that hangs to the knee. I resolved to buy an outfit as soon as I reached India.

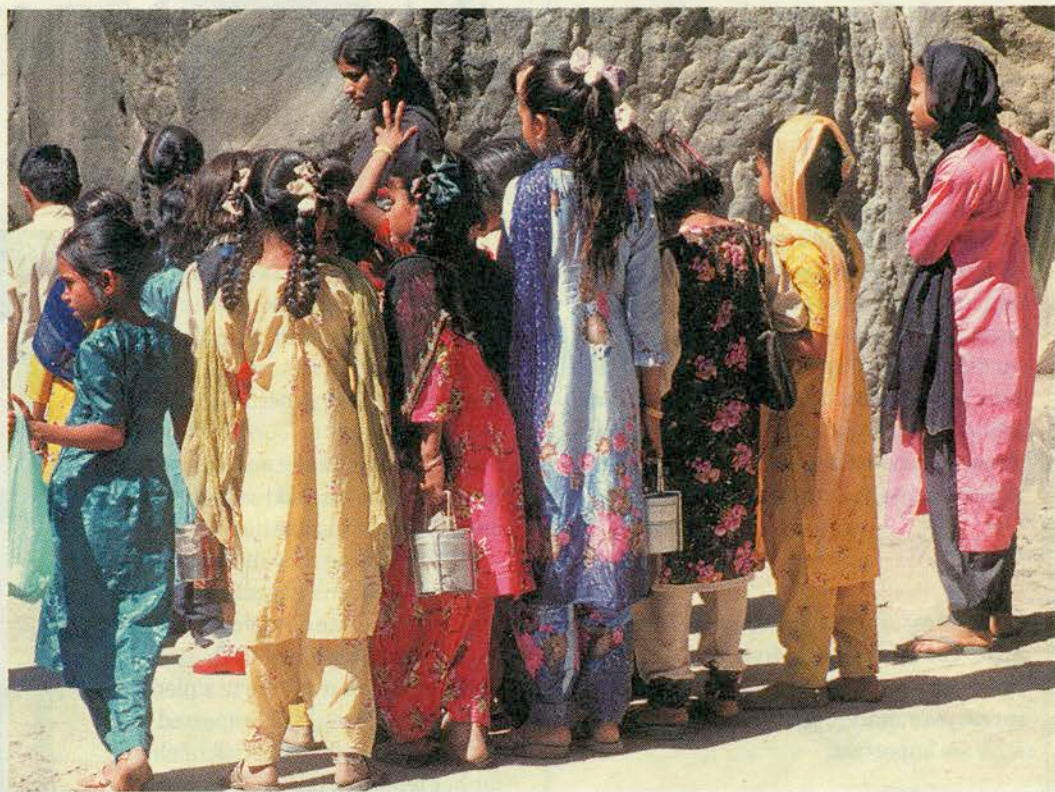
Arriving in Madras on a blistering day, I am greeted by Mr. Ulhas and his wife Shanthi, who are friends of friends back in Canada. Understanding my need to dress appropriately (despite her broken English), Shanthi takes me shopping for my Indian outfit. Tripping over broken pavement and sleeping cows, I try to keep up with Shanthi, who manoeuvres expertly past the *chai* stalls, bangle-sellers, and shoe salesman.

We visit three stores in search of the perfect *salwar kameez*. The evening air seems as hot as the midday sun and all I want is an outfit that is light, cool, and simple.

Every *kameez* she chooses is as busy, exquisite and ornate as a Hindu temple. Embroidered, pleated, and beaded, Shanthi's selections make me feel trussed and fussed just to look at them. I cannot imagine wearing any of these for my whole sojourn in India. Shanthi, for her part, cannot understand why a woman travelling with mighty foreign dollars would want anything less.

At our last shop, I spend 850 rupees on an enormous *salwar kameez* in blue and grey, laced ludicrously with threads of gold. The gold is an unavoidable adornment. I am the one who insists on the large size, believing, in my befuddled fatigue, that the loose fabric will make me feel cooler, as if loosely battened in a large, breezy spinnaker.

I do not feel like an Indian woman in my *salwar kameez*. I feel overpackaged and ungainly. The women around me, by contrast, carry themselves with a poise and grace that make the folds of cloth



*A salwar kameez may feel like a 'breezy spinnaker' to Westerners, but wearing one while travelling in India will earn you respect from your hosts.*

look artful and airy, comfortable and striking.

When I strike out on my own, my *salwar kameez* — I admit — affords some authenticity to disguise my raw panic. From Madras, I head to Mysore and I can't resist looking in some shops for a simpler *kameez*.

No embroidery, no pleats: It is white and plain, printed with small blue triangles that bring out my eyes. It is one-quarter the cost of the one I have on. Weeks later, an Indian tailor tells me that my new *kameez* is of a cut, print, and pattern that no Indian woman would wear, but I feel bona fide and comfortable. I wear my Indian outfit almost every day, washing it in the evening and hanging it to dry in the hot night.

Throughout southern India, my *salwar kameez* becomes a password of sorts, allowing me to board crowded local buses and wander the streets of villages not mentioned in my guidebook. I can bargain for a pineapple and pay a reasonable price. With my pale skin and light brown hair, I

turn as many heads as I would had I been wearing western clothes, but the heads stay turned for less time. I am an outsider, but I at least have the appearance of someone who has been doing it, demurely and respectfully, for a while.

For the rest of my time in India, I do not meet another Shanthi. Many rural women do not speak English and shy away from the foreigners they encounter. I meet other solo female travellers and we commiserate over the difficulty of getting to know Indian women when, ironically, so many Indian men are eager to make our acquaintance.

But, sure enough, in my *salwar kameez*, I attract fewer overly attentive male admirers. The women nod in approval. In the swelter of the "Ladies Only" waiting rooms at the train stations, the women watch me reorganizing my pack, paging through my guidebook, planning my unimaginable next move. They look partly bewildered and partly bemused, but they almost always return my smile.