

# Visiting India Carries a Jolt

Shocking poverty and humbling temples transform traveller

BY SHELLEY WOOD

To leave a job, especially for something as frivolous as travel, is like stepping voluntarily into a second adolescence: reckless, headstrong, and indefensible. Some people quit easily, without a backward glance. Others never do, but spend their winter evenings poring over glossy travel magazines, imagining clever camera angles and exotic cuisines. Still others take the middle route, asking for and being granted the coveted leave of absence.

In theory, a leave of absence is the best of all possible worlds, allowing an invigorating dabble in a different culture while keeping a light burning on the back porch. It is a way of having your cake and freezing some for later. You leave, you travel, you return to the regular paycheques, the cozy cubicle marked Reserved.

Sounds easy.

I now know that three months is an odd length of time to be away—too long to be “on vacation”; too short to truly find your stride as a traveller, practise invincibility, pace across a continent as if you owned it, or at least could buy it off with your mighty foreign currency and some shrewd bargaining.

I chose southern India. With only three months, it seemed sensible to remain as long as possible in a small area, rather than dashing around the subcontinent seeing everything and nothing. I chose the south because, in Canada, in December, I was cold and southern India wasn't.

Retrospect has helped me to evolve the theory that, for westerners, visiting Asian countries is

a jolt. Flying into Madras from Bangkok was like being poured from a cup of creamy, tepid coffee into a bottle of wickedly fizzy cola, an exuberant soda of heat, noise, and traffic. My first and lasting impression of India was of a sticky crush of men, women, carts, bicycles, meandering cows, and desperate chickens, all vying with one another and the ubiquitous drifting garbage to make the roads utterly impassable for the honking Fiats and lawless auto-rickshaws.

A family I'd never met—friends of friends—picked me up at the airport and took me into their home. They eased me into India. With their help, I learned how to dress, to bargain, to eat with my hands, to don that invaluable mask of aloofness and disdain to disguise incomprehension and raw panic.

On my second day, my host, Mr. Ulhas, took me proudly through Madras's major shopping mall, complete with a CD shop and appliance store. He was delighted by the experience. “You see! You see!” he exclaimed, turning the dial on a stackable washing machine for emphasis. “Modern-modern. Made in India. You can buy anything in India, madam, anything.”

More interesting to me was the local market, just down the block from their home. Mr. Ulhas paraded me through, puzzled by my curiosity, but pleased to be my chaperone. Even under the dim, covered stalls, his wide sunglasses never left his face.

The candid market photographs I'd envisioned snapping proved impossible. Mr. Ulhas curtly instructed everyone—the rice seller,

to hold still: the Canadian Lady wished to take pictures. Occasionally he would stop and point authoritatively at a particularly impressive banana. These, he informed me, were superior bananas. “From Kerala, like me. All of the best fruits come from Kerala.”

Extricating myself from the overwhelming hospitality of the Ulhas family was tricky business. I was travelling solo. I was female. I was traipsing across India, with no strict agenda, no set destination. This was unfathomable. Finally, having fattened my address book with the names of second cousins and sisters' husbands' uncles in every corner of the country, they let me go. Confidence is a drug: six days with them and I had India waxed.

Heading inland on my own, I realized I'd been a little hasty with my self-congratulation. Who waxes India? I survived my first week alone. The crowds, poverty, and filth were flabbergasting, but more disconcerting still was the speed with which I became immune to them. Calloused. The guilt accompanying this process was periodically and unpredictably immobilizing. Ultimately, I blistered, then toughened up. People had told me smugly before I left Canada that I would love and hate India. Why did no one explain that these emotions would follow each other like carpet salesmen, striking like lightning and equally devastating?

I'm a quick learner. I did the India things. I priced incense and sandalwood. I wore bindis on my forehead. I got lost in frantic urban centres, placing myself at the



The weathered temples of Mamallapuram mix with sandalwood, chai, and filth to make for an unforgettable experience. Shelley Wood photo.

back to my vanished hotels. I learned the true price of a pineapple. I became discerning and obsessive about my frequent cups of milky-sweet chai. I came to respect the coconut palm as the most

globe. I rode impossibly crowded buses driven at equally impossible speeds, marvelling at young children who could fall asleep standing up and leaning against the midribs of strangers who, in turn,



appeared not to notice. I sweated. I discovered pores, new avenues for perspiration I never knew I had. I caught exotic, harmless fevers that showed me, in moments of delirious enlightenment, that the grim reaper is essentially dressed in a black, ill-fitting sari.

I tried on a sari and felt just as ugly and grim.

I was surreptitiously groped on crowded trains and brazenly grabbed on the open street. I was constantly ripped off. I learned, in time, to accept this, growing both wiser and amusedly indifferent. These are mechanisms of self-preservation that should be bottled and sold, along with patience and a sense of humour, at tourist information bureaus across the country. At a yoga ashram, I learned that your limbs can be contorted into the most unlikely postures, just as long as you cut out onions and seasonings from your diet. I visited temples. Lots of them. Small village temples where I felt humbled by ancient, incomprehensible rituals. Sprawling, timeless, ornate, kaleidoscopic temples where the rituals were equally alive and complicated, just

somewhat showier and with more obvious places to leave your shoes.

The weird thing? In a country where so many people have so little, yet have everything for sale, I bought almost nothing. No rugs, no silver rings, no silk, no woodwork, no marble-inlay mini Taj Mahals. I was acutely aware that the option, unexercised, to buy whatever I wanted was a luxury in itself.

Bargains and souvenirs aside, most travellers bring back more from their journeys than they declare at customs—things quite apart from *Giardia lamblia* and the occasional, clinically benign rash. I did. I brought back patience, tested into tatters by Indian bureaucracy. I brought a deeper appreciation of kindness, learned from strangers who time and again rescued me from treacherous self-pity. I brought a sturdier sense of myself as a survivor, not of anything tangible like a natural disaster or terrorist act, but of an alienation unlike anything I'd ever encountered in my own culture. I now understand the jagged vitality of feeling truly alone, surrounded by the sweaty press of crowds.

The real question is how to reconcile this new sense of self with what waited calmly and unchangingly for

the three months to end—the desk drawer shyly offering the same tangle of paper clips and Post-its, the dreamlike familiarity of network passwords, personalized computer screensavers, and daily trips to Starbucks. Going back to work was easy. Way too easy. Disturbingly easy. If I was so changed by my travels, how was it that I could still slip so snugly into the old routines?

What I need, I think, is a way of linking the thereness of India with the hereness of my home life. I want to keep everything I learned or felt current, fresh, and starkly important regardless of what work I'm doing, what clothes I wear, which jam I choose for my toast.

Not so easy.

I have the photographs to help me. The fishmonger smirking ever so slightly, her fish fanned out like cards in front of her. The rice man posing rigidly beside immaculate cones of *reji* and *semolina*. I have one picture of Mr. Ulhas, taken at the ancient temples of Mamallapuram. He stands arrow-straight in his carefully pressed blue jeans and dark glasses, incongruous beside the weathered ruins. His car keys dangle from his right hand. I'm tempted to use this picture for my screensaver. Modern-modern.

He would like that. ■