

Excerpt from a Travel Journal on a Visit to *South India*

Being in India was an experience that is hard to describe. There is so much sensory overload---so many people flowing like the tributaries of one river ---so much richness and poverty side-by-side ---so much history and newness in one space---so many complex flavors---so many beautiful smiles---so *many* Hindu gods (I couldn't keep track of them all) --- so, so, so, much to absorb and process. I finally realized that we began to travel out of the western sphere when I sensed for the first time in my life that there is no possible way for me to adequately acclimate into this culture...no matter how much I learn or how much I try. It's more complex and foreign to me than I had previously understood. I try hard to bring a humble approach to this country and my hosts, as it is clear that I have much to learn from them.

Traveling in Chennai on my first day in South India, in an autorickshaw (read: a three-wheeled vespa scooter with a carriage for 4 people on the back), I shared the road with the following:

- Taxis
- Motorcycles
- Hand-propelled wagons, carts, and flatbed contraptions
- Scooters
- Bicycles
- Trucks
- Bicycle-propelled wagons, carts, and flatbed contraptions
- Bullock carts (wooden carts and wheels powered by oxen)
- Government vehicles encased in wire mesh (to prevent rocks and other missiles from shattering the windows)
- Rickshaws (both motor-powered and human cycle-powered)
- Pedestrians
- Buses

The only form of ground transportation I haven't seen here yet is a skateboard. From the bullock carts to the government vehicles, we span at least 4 centuries of transportation forms.

Maneuvering in traffic, or crossing the road, is not for the faint of heart. The noise appeared deafening, until I figured out that everyone uses their horn or bell as a way of telling others, "Hey, I'm next to you." Of course, the great irony of this is that everyone else responds back ("hey, I'm next to you"), and the auditory cacophony goes on. Once I figured it out, it became an amusing foreign language I enjoyed 'learning'.

... We had had the great fortune to be befriended by a kind-hearted Indian man who had a small store full of treasures. We bought a small silk rug and a spectacular dancing Shiva statue from him. He also loaned us his car and driver for the last three days, which has been an incredible blessing.

One of the great aspects of a local driver is his ability to take us to the really local places to eat. We thought we knew what Indian food was, but it turns out it's just like the Chinese food hoax. No one eats the 'curries' you find on Indian restaurant menus back home ---besides which, this is *South India* and most dishes that count as 'Indian' back home, are from *one region in the north* of this vast country.

You eat with your right hand, and the fun is trying to eat with just your fingers, without using any cutlery. So, you mix rice with any of the side dishes, using your fingers (your palm must stay dry). The trick is getting the consistency right so it's not runny. You make a ball of the mixed rice-and-gravy, then lower your face towards the plate so you can pop the rice ball into your mouth. The first time we ate out, we had no idea what was on the menu, or what to do. In each place, we have been the only non-Indians in the joint. So, we tried to watch the locals and imitate what they were doing. All the waiters have had a good laugh at our expense.

I still can't explain the food, even though I have experienced it firsthand, but had no one has told us the names of each dish we tasted. Most of the restaurants in South India are vegetarian ... but the style of vegetarianism is different from what we practice in America – no tofu, for instance, and lots of different flavors because of the spices and condiments. The food is organic, so each vegetable has an actual taste, and the portions don't need to be big, as the complexity of the flavors of each dish are deeply satisfying.

The variety of dishes make us want to try everything -- from crispy rice crepes stuffed with potatoes, to savory batter-fried vegetables dipped into various condiments and served on a bun. Tasted a vegetable called a drumstick because it's long and stick-like but fleshy on the inside. Chew on a cooked drumstick and you are treated to the explosion of the flavors it's absorbed from the gravy. Just know that there's no delicate way to spit the fibrous remnants onto your plate. We have been anticipating each bite of every meal.

This first glimpse of street life in India is like nothing I could imagine in my privileged life. The poverty is overwhelming if you stop and think about what you are seeing. Last night we saw day wage laborers sleeping on the curb on thin mats, next to stray dogs and open drains. Not something you see back home even though I know America has its own tent cities and homeless poor.

I have thought a lot about poverty on this tour and wish I could say that I have figured out the answers, but (of course) I haven't. What I do realize now is that poverty is not as simple as I once thought, and that poor people are not a product of laziness. What I can see clearly is the incredible unequal distribution of wealth among nations--I think half of things thrown out in the US could be used by other people back home, which makes me very sad.

So, there's lots of grist for the intellectual and emotion mills as we travel. I hope I don't choose to forget these impressions when I return home. I want to demand less from others and do more for them. Small words, kind gestures, India is teaching me the value of all that.