

India

Our small escorted group to India has returned, totally carried-out but ready for any fancy dress party requiring a sari and gaudy jewellery.

I was ready for the noise in India, the pollution and masses of people.

But what bowled me over was the friendliness and kindness of the people in Kerala in south-west India.

We got away from the normal tourist spots and the Aussies stood out like the proverbial pimple on a thumb.

People wanted to have their photos taken with Sue (Howard) all the time. Her blonde hair was a source of intense discussion, usually followed by friendly giggles. The locals loved practising their English on us and more giggles would follow when we responded to their attempts.

On a visit to a fort one day we came across a wedding couple having their pictures taken by a professional photographer. As soon as the bride noticed us she wanted us in the wedding photos too, not that we were in the least dressed for such an occasion.

But it gets better while driving to our destination in the mountains one morning we came across a traditional Hindu wedding and asked our driver to stop for photos.



As soon as the tourists were noticed at the gate, the bride's father invited us in and we were soon standing on a beautifully decorated little platform having our photos taken with the newly weds. We must have looked like Christmas trees at a funeral, totally out of place with sunnies on the head and wearing shorts and T-shirts. We were surrounded by women in their elegant saris and men wearing their crisply ironed white shirts and dark pants; all touching us and genuinely pleased to see us.

We were introduced to the whole family, including grandpa and then came the invitation to stay for the reception; which we did. I can now say that I have gate-crashed a wedding. The reception was held outdoors under a makeshift cover for shade. A table was quickly set up for us and huge banana leaves appeared which we assumed were the placemats. Not so – they were our plates and we were soon eating like the locals, with our right hand scooping up the food from the banana leaf.

We were surrounded by the guests who stood there watching while we ate and asking questions, usually starting with “what is your good name?” and then telling us how much they liked Ricky Ponting.

The tourists took away all the attention from the bride and we felt somewhat uncomfortable about this. But grandpa explained to me that his granddaughter was marrying an advocate (barrister) and having international guests at the wedding adds to the importance of the occasion and increases the social standards of the bride's parents.

Parents pay big money to get their daughters married to the right men.

While sitting in a train on our first day I read the local newspaper which had two full pages of advertisements from parents advertising the suitability of their daughters as wives; and stipulating the sort of man they want as a son-in-law. They have no qualms in openly asking for a doctor or barrister from a good family (meaning high caste) to apply. Almost all Hindu marriages are still arranged between parents.

Something else that stood out was the absence of occupational health and safety regulations. We went on a nature walk on an organic coffee farm one morning, each with a walking stick to clear the bushes and tall grass in front of us. Two of us fell over during the walk.

Because the farm is surrounded by three game reserves we were shown evidence of an elephant here and a tiger there. At one point our young guide showed us some fresh tiger scratch marks and claimed he could smell the animal. Just then there was a rustle in the nearby reeds and we were told to move on quickly.

We continued our walk, turned a corner and nearly walked straight into an elephant coming our way. Sue, armed with only her walking stick, was closest to the elephant and had to make a hasty retreat off the path.

A highlight for us all was an impromptu visit to Santhwana Bhavan, a school for street kids. With classroom and dormitory-style bedrooms all under one roof, two nuns from the Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Theresa, look after 22 girls aged between five and 15 years.

The boarding school is for girls only, regardless of caste and creed.

Kannur Diocese meets the running expenses and Lions International has also adopted the school as a project. But they are in desperate need of more donations to feed, clothe and educate the girls and we all dug deep into our pockets when we left.

The girls were spotlessly clean, happy and obviously well-cared for. Some of them were exceptionally bright. We were told that the little urchins all lived on the streets begging for food to stay alive when they were found by the nuns. Three little sisters were found at the markets, eating scraps. Their father an alcoholic and their mother a prostitute. The oldest one told me she will never go home again because she wants to do something with her life.

The smaller ones gravitated towards Rejeana (Turner) who delighted them with nursery rhymes, stories and singing. They too loved Sue's blond hair.

A little girl tugged me by the arm, pointed to a picture of Christ on the wall and in her broken English said "Jesus, my Jesus" while pointing to her heart. For the first time they felt they belonged to someone who loved them.

Most of the kids had never been hugged before and some of them were very uncomfortable when we said goodbye to them in Aussie style.

The little ones waved cheerfully when our bus departed; the older ones appeared sad. They became very attached to their visitors in the short time we were there.

We were in India for only two weeks but because we avoided the tourist areas we enjoyed a refreshing experience with memories that will last a lifetime, living the life Kerala-style. We were invited into people's homes, from the humble auto-rickshaw driver to a family from the highest Hindu caste.

Our tour leader, Roy Rhoderick (Rejeana's cousin) was fearless in asking for favours and we went to the fish markets with our chef at the Taj Hotel, hired a fisherman to paddle us around the backwaters, had a cooking lesson, went to a local festival and, much to the amusement of the locals, went bike riding along the beach. I learned later that you only ride a bicycle if you cannot afford a car and that tourists are seen to be very rich. So to see a wealthy person on a bike was apparently hilarious.

India was definitely not without its problems. Bad footpaths and litter everywhere made it almost impossible to go for a jog in the morning and on New Year's Eve our hotel put up a sign 'Today is a dry day'. No alcohol!

We also had to get used to 'India time', and I thought Africa time and Fiji time was bad....

But once you learn to kick back and coast along, turn a blind eye to the litter and have some duty-free gin in your bag for 'dry days' there is only one word that sums up India – enchanting.

