

SOUTH-INDIA JULY 2014

From inside the airport terminal in Brussels on July 4th, 2014 me and my friend could already behold the Airbus A330 that would take us to Mumbai. Filled with expectations we boarded the plane and enjoyed a lovely flight. Late that night we took a cab and drove in excruciating speed towards the city center. The first thing we noticed: Mumbai is big. With only two days to spend here we were committed to make the most of it and so we did. Overall, our stay did not feel overwhelming at all. The rhythm of the most populated Indian city grew on us fast and we were sad to leave. We were impressed by the architectural jewels, a mix of colonial-era and art deco. The night brought us a bit closer to Belgium again, as we supported the Belgian national soccer team in a local sports bar.



Image: Mumbai

The next day we saw another side of Mumbai, such as the impressive tomb of Hadji Alli, only accessible during low tide and the Pherozeshah Mehta Gardens, terraced gardens perched at the top of Malabar Hill, where we could see immense skyscrapers touch the clouds above the city. As Mumbai is filled with different religions, we visited a Jain temple, where we could observe the ongoing ceremonies. We ended our Mumbai visit with the Indian comedy-drama film Bobby Jasoos, to get in touch with the immensely popular Bollywood culture.

Another great experience and one of the highlights of our trip, although people usually have different prejudices about it, was the night train from Mumbai to Goa. I never travelled such big distances in this luxury. We slept with six kind other people around us, , but this did not stop us sleeping for 9 hours straight, relaxing on the rhythmic cadence of the train and arriving well-rested in the hippie colony of old.

As the rainy season was upon us, the jungle was lush and green. The atmosphere was relaxed and hassle-free, as we marveled at centuries-old cathedrals or meandered the state capital city's charming alleyways. Of course we visited the magnificent (but often a bit dirty) beaches such as Calangute, Baga and Vagator. During these wanderings my friend parked his scooter in the middle of a rice field, which ensured great hilarity among the spectators. For us a highlight was Old Goa, the Rome of the east from the 16th to the 18th century, and we still felt that grandeur as we walked around. We found the melancholy, evocative ruins of the Monastery of St Augustine to be very impressive.



Image: Old Goa

Next on the schedule: Hampi. This small village in central Karnataka left us spellbound the moment we casted our eyes upon it. A friendly rickshaw driver led us from the train to the most beautiful hostel in town, filled with monkeys and a magnificent views on the hills and river of Hampi. The forlorn ruins of Hampi felt unreal and bewitching, as heaps of giant boulders perch precariously over miles of undulating terrain. A mesmerizing place, which we enjoyed on the back of our dirt bikes.

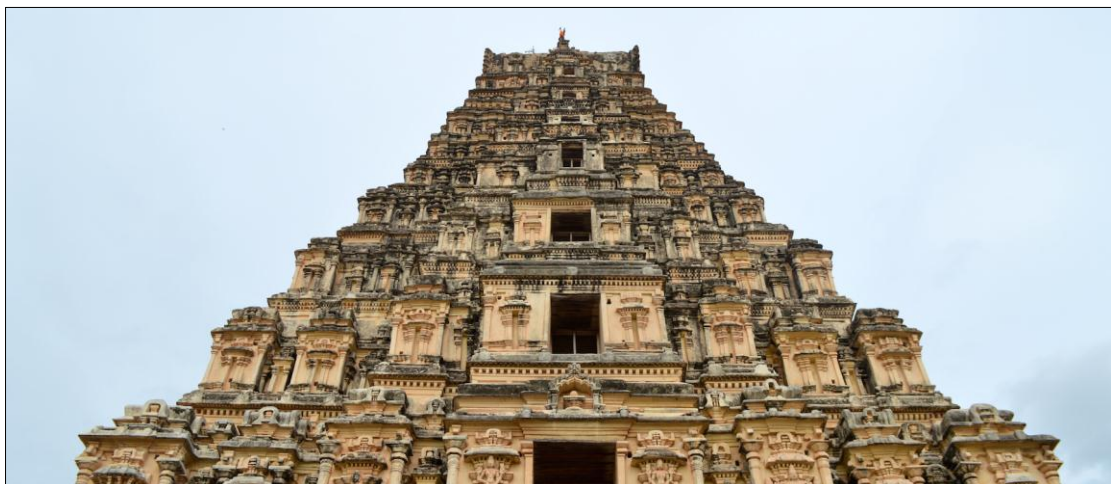


Image: Hampi

We headed to Mysore satisfied. Mysore is overall not a pretty town and the hotel experience we had was abysmal, but the famous Mysore Palace is among the grandest of India's royal buildings. The Palace is huge and its interior shamelessly over the top, with lots of stained glass, mirrors, carved wooden doors and mosaic floors. As Mysore is a thriving center for the production of sandalwood and incense, we could not leave the place without it.

As we both love nature, we wanted to go to a national park to get some serious hiking done. With this in mind we set pace to Wayanad, just a few hours away from Mysore by bus. Part of a remote forest reserve that spills into Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, a landscape that combines epic mountain scenery, rice paddies, bamboo, red earth, spiky ginger fields, rubber and coffee plantations.



Image: Wayanad

We set foot in Kalpetta, a local town in the middle of the Wayanad Area and a good spot to start exploring from, or so we believed. The next day the rain greeted us in the morning and did not leave our side for the three next days. We went to some local caves, which appeared to be closed. We did our best to find an alternative and fixed ourselves a little wildlife safari in the deep middle of the park, with wild elephants in mind. But the one hour jeep ride was not really successful, as our guide was sleeping the whole time and we only saw some wild dogs and a spotted deer.

We gave Wayanad another chance the next day, with a climb to the epic Chembra peak. But again the rain greeted us as an old friend and we were told it was too dangerous to go all the way to the top in the rainy season. We did however went halfway before a major rain storm swept us away.



Image: Beach near Alleppey

The penultimate destination was Alleppey, the hub of Kerala's backwaters and home to a vast network of waterways and houseboats. The backwaters were graceful and green, fringed and disappearing into a watery world of villages and canoes. We did not choose for the (expensive) houseboats but took a canoe ourselves and spent a day wandering around the magnificent surroundings. As India is the cradle of yoga, we submerged ourselves in it during evening classes. The last stop was Kochi where we stayed in the famous Fort Chochin, an unlikely blend of medieval Portugal and Holland. It was a fantastic place to spend some time and rest of our packed trip.

We would like to thank BICC&I and Jet Airways for this fantastic experience!