



MY JOURNEY TO INDIA

By Rachael Sellars
January - February 2010

It's been over one month since I've been back from my journey to India. An amazing experience that is difficult to put down on paper. I will do my best to take you through my travels and with that I included some photos that I would love to share. You'll find them in an album at Yoga Sanctuary's facebook (Yoga Sanctuary Las Vegas). These were some of my favorites, selected from over 700 photos taken from about 6 of us. There were 25 in the group so I can only imagine how many I will have once I retrieve more photos. Enjoy and take in the local people, the culture and the sites.

First week was spent in Kerala's capital, the coastal city of Trivandrum set on seven low hills, 87km from the southern tip of India. Stayed at Somatheeram Ayurvedic (AYUR literally meaning life and VEDA the science or knowledge) Health Resort where 25 of us had a personal consultation with an Ayurvedic doctor for a recommended course of treatment for the week. According to ancient Hindu beliefs, Ayurveda was gifted to mankind by the gods to help lead a healthy and fruitful life free from mortal ailments. A 5,000 year-old holistic medical science, Ayurveda has become linked with Kerala, thanks to the region's tropical climate, its rigorous standards of practice, and its wealth of medicinal herbs. Ayurveda's goal is to preserve a balance between the forces and principles thought to govern the body, mind, and soul. Doctors prescribe treatments based on your constitution, and remedies usually take the form of medicated oils and herbal concoctions that are ingested or massaged into or poured over the body. My personal favorites; the Sirodhara, where in this process some herbal oils, medicated milk, medicated buttermilk etc, are poured on the forehead in a special method of about 45-60 minutes. The second one called Elakizhi, where herbal garlic and lemon leaves are made in wrapped cloth bundles and are applied on the whole body after dipping in warm medicate oils. This is done for 45 minutes and even though I smelled like an Italian salad dressing, it is very effective for treating muscular and joint inflammation.

The resort has quaint individual cottages scattered over lush greens, overlooking the expansive white sand beach and Indian Ocean. Morning and evening Yoga practices lead by the inspirational Annie Carpenter. Healthy fresh meals were prepared daily for each individual's dosha (constitution), which I have to say helped me tremendously educating myself about my own eating habits and what was good for my digestion. The weather in the 80's, the hardworking staff, the local tailor who made me clothes for nothing, the incredible bond between the group, the variety of Kerala dishes and after a few days, I even got used to the mosquitoes and the random little creatures showing up in my cottage. I was sad to leave and never felt more at peace and balanced. I still miss my morning Masala Chai on my porch with my roommate Karen watching the sunrise.

The second part of the trip and another way of exploring Kerala "the land of coconuts" is actually in the travelling itself, especially by boat. Our group had the luxury of floating on an overnight houseboat through the serene backwaters, slowly meandering through the spellbinding Kuttanad region drifting between dense tropical greenery and rural tiny villages that are completely hidden by the roads. Some families live on tiny pockets of land, with just enough room for a simple house, yard and boat. They bathe and wash their clothes at the water's edge. Traditional Kerala longboats, 'Kettu vallam', glide along, powered by gondolier-like boatmen with poles and sails. Most people rely on boatmen to ferry them across the water to connect with roads and bus services, attend school, mosques, churches and temples. I have to admit that this experience was one of my most memorable moments. Four of us on a houseboat with our own personal chef and drivers. The Kerala food is eclectic, savory and adventuresome. Rice is the staple (great for gluten sensitive), coconut milk and coconut oil are the two most important ingredients, and a tasty and tender white fish called 'Karimeen' is the favorite fish of central Kerala, found only in the backwaters. We watched how the locals lived, the kids canoed to school and the most incredible sunset and sunrise that is hard to put into words. We were lucky enough to drift without a motor and only hear the sounds of nature and the local music from distant radios. Om Shanti....

Our group then entered into more chaos from this point of the journey on visiting Delhi. It is said that experiencing the city is best navigated on wheels so I rode my first cycle-rickshaw to get around the narrow lanes; a walkers delight. In awe the entire time of the millions of people, cows, monkeys, and old markets bursting with fresh produce, spices and salty snacks. Squawking chickens running through quaint little shops of silver jewelry and a plethora of markets inviting you in for the quest of the latest fashions and sports wear and at the same time where every religion finds expression.

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Bus ride took us next to Agra, which is southeast of Delhi. Agra is very crowded and dirty but the government has taken steps to protect the city's most important site from pollutions, closing the streets around the Taj Mahal to gas-fueled vehicles and relocating small factories and fire-burning shops away from the area. Our group was the first in line outside the Taj Mahal before the sun came up. It was so worth being there in the morning to see the Taj in varying lights when the pale rays of the sun gave the marble a soft pink luster. We all spent the morning touring the grounds and taking pictures of the majestic Taj Mahal. Of course we all had to strike a pose ... come on ... we are Yogis and couldn't resist. I could go on for pages about the architect of the building and the legend behind it, but the Taj Mahal, one of the world's great treasures, speaks for itself. Due to keeping this brief, I advise to do a little research and I highly recommend an amazing novel called "Beneath a Marble Sky." The love of the Taj Mahal will be revealed. Also visited the Agra Fort, which was another beautiful structure. The word "fort" is misleading; the complex, really a fortified palace, contains royal apartments, mosques, assembly halls, and a dungeon and you can see the entire cityscape from the rooftop. Agra is known for marble inlay, jewelry, and leather.

Took an overnight train (an adventure in itself) to the ancient city of sacred light, Varanasi, the religious center for the Hindu religion. It is a magnet for people with mystical leanings of any kind. Varanasi is essentially a temple city dedicated to Lord Shiva, Lord of Destruction. Some come to Shiva's city seeking inspiration from masters of classical music or of Yoga; known to have about 75 yoga centers in the area. Others come simply to absorb the holiness of the site and the focused spiritual energy from so many centuries of fervent belief. Every devout Hindu wants to visit Varanasi to purify body and soul in the Ganges (river), to shed all sins, and if possible, to die here in old age and achieve 'moksha' (freedom) and release from the cycle of rebirth. Descending from the Himalayas on its long course to the Bay of Bengal, the Ganges is believed by Hindu's to hold the power of salvation in each drop. Pilgrims seek that salvation along the length of the river, but their holiest site is Varanasi. Every year, the city welcomes millions of pilgrims for whom these waters – fouled by the pollution of humans both living and dead – remain pristine enough to cleanse the soul. The heart of the city is a maze of streets and alleys and array of at least 2,000 temples and shrines. The streets are noisy and rife with color (wait till you see the pictures), the air is heavy with pollution and there is constant noise of honking mixed with temple gongs and bells. Garlands of flowers are everywhere destined for the gods and placed in the water as offerings with tea lit candles. In the evening our group hired a boat, an essential Varanasi experience off the main Ghats (stone or concrete steps, 40-100 feet long) and floated downstream to the Cremation Ghats where one can see bodies wrapped in silk or linen being carried on bamboo stretchers to the smoking pyres. The body is placed on the pyre (a heap of combustible material) for the ritual that precedes the cremation. Funeral parties dressed in white, the color of mourning, hover with their deceased. Varanasi; also known to be called "the City of Learning and Burning." Up to 5 years ago poor people were unable to afford wood to burn a body completely. The remains would just be thrown in the water. Donations are given to help buy wood for the poor. That evening on the water we watched a ceremony that is performed seven days a week at the Main Steps (Dashashwamedh Ghats), where a group of priests perform a ceremony called the "Anji Pooja" (worship to Fire) wherein a dedication is made to Lord Shiva, River Ganga, Surya (sun), Agni (fire) and the whole universe. I was in awe the entire time and even though there were millions of people everywhere; there was a powerful sense of peace all around us and nothing else mattered. We came back in the morning and watched people bathe in the waters, and witnessed washer men and women do early morning laundry by beating it against stones along the riverbank. One could sit for hours watching beggars, people doing yoga, meditation, blessings into the Ganga, talking, and drinking chai tea. This city and experience will always be close to my heart. I hope to one day make it back and spend some time there.

Of course it would take me pages to write about all my experiences in India. I hope that you could at least sit down and enjoy my journey and pictures. Doing this a month later has brought up many moments that helped me digest my time away. If anything I am ever so grateful for my life here in Vegas, my family and friends, my love of Yoga, my students and my wish to live everyday Happy and Healthy! Lokah Samasta Sukinoh Bavantu... May all beings everywhere feel love and peace!

Namaste
Rachael Sellars