

Journey to India

Chapter 5: Varanasi to Goa

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Leaving Varanasi I spent the next few days on the train. Sleeping on my wooden plank, reading, writing, smoking hash and looking out the window as India rolled by.

Winter was coming, and I was heading south on my journey to new territory and warmer climes. My sights were set on the Malabar coast, namely Cochin, Trivandrum and Kovalam Beach. After a night in Madras, I spent another 30 hours on the train to Mangalore, where I killed five hours before catching a train down to Calicut. There I spent the night before catching another train further down the coast to Cochin.

I stepped off the train in Cochin at midnight and into a thundering tropical storm. With my pack on my back, I was skirting deep puddles and wading waist deep through others, in search of cheap accommodation. My spirits were high, and singing in the Malabar rain, I just took things as they came. I was feeling easy about things like not knowing where I was going to sleep that night.

I was enthralled with India. Here I was in a place where one could easily say I didn't belong, culturally, ethnically, but where I soaked up a feeling of serenity. It wasn't that my surroundings were peaceful. No matter where I went in India, and no matter how jubilant or joyful the environment, there was always life's struggle and much suffering, from poverty, but also from petty cruelty and human injustice, on display.

Maybe it was that I was adrift, detached from any semblance of what would have been considered normal life back in my homeland and any responsibility or expectation I would have felt back home. Walking through this primitive world, among people living on a simple level of bare existence, I felt a sense of comfort with my own imperfect self.

Calicut and Cochin, both facing the Arabian Sea along the Malabar Coast in the State of Kerala, were important ports for the ancient spice trade. They offered a free and secure port for Jews, Arabs, Phoenicians and Chinese merchants, who traded for spices like black pepper and cardamom beginning about 2,000 years ago. Europeans discovered the trade routes to the Malabar Coast in the 1500s.

Leaving the hotel to wander on my first morning I was taken by how modern Cochin seemed compared to the places I'd been living in India. Although plenty of primitive India was still apparent, there were proper streets lined with shops, all with glass, showroom style windows. I was used to people squatting in the street with their goods laid out on the ground or propped on a shelf stuck in beneath someone's windowsill.



One of the first things I wanted to do was get some Kerala grass. I don't ever remember anyone smoking marijuana in the North, just hash, or charras, as it is called, but weed is prevalent in the South, and Kerala grass is famous.

It didn't take me long wandering around down by the docks and the network of canals known as the Cochin backwaters, before I found a friendly young Indian who could help me get a kilo of ganja for about 200 rupees, which was then about \$20.

The next item on my agenda was a visa extension. At that time an American could get a three-month visa and then extend it for three months. I found out that I had to make an application for that with the Police Commissioner, which I planned to do the next day.

But first, I found a tailor to make a shirt and pants for me out of the raw silk I had purchased in Varanasi.

I had him make a sort of a shirt-jacket, which buttoned up the front and was collarless. The pants had a draw-string waist and were slit up from the ankle with button and loop closures. The latter was to make it easy to roll them up when I would have to wade through puddles or navigate muddy streets.

I had sold or traded almost all of my clothes for hash when I'd first arrived in Kashmir. My wardrobe now, in addition to the raw silk clothes I just had made, was mostly local garb, such as kurta-pajamas, lungis, other loose cotton pants and shirts. I didn't have many clothes. I had no need for them in India, and I had to keep and carry everything in the Tibetan backpack I had bought in McLeod Ganj.

I had kept one pair of decent khaki pants and, of all things, a cowboy shirt with pearl snaps, which was cotton polyester and looked pressed without having to be ironed. I called those my embassy clothes, since they were reserved for the times I had to face officials and not appear as a drug-addled hippie traveler.

So the next day I put on my embassy clothes and went to fill out an application and leave my passport with the Police Commissioner. When I came back to the hotel, the manager told me the police had been in my room. They were checking me out because I'd applied for the visa extension.

Oh shit, I thought as I walked up to my room since I had that kilo of grass in the top of my backpack, which was on the floor beside the bed and was just about the only thing in the room. What else would they look at? The room seemed untouched; I walked over to the backpack and looked inside. The grass was still there. A few days later my visa extension was approved, no problem.

I was born Jewish and consider myself Jewish, but I'm not religious in any way. I'm not an atheist or agnostic, but I certainly don't have a fixed conception of whatever power produced or governs this Universe. There were times, especially on LSD and other psychedelic drugs, when I've had profound spiritual experiences, and there have been times that I've been captivated, to an extent, by varying mystical beliefs. Yet I am as leery of organized spirituality as I am of organized religion. For the sake of honesty, however, I must confess that due to the fact that at this writing I've been sober for more than 18 years, I can now comfortably say that although I don't believe in God, because if I did my mind would talk me out of it, I have experienced God by following certain disciplines that have let me experience a different life.

Enough about that, since the point here being nothing more than being Jewish and growing up as a minority in

America, at a time when I personally encountered prejudice and hatred, I have always been fascinated to find Jews in other, often strange parts of the world. Hence, when I heard about Jew Town in Kerala I had to go and have a look.

Jews first arrived in Kerala the after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, and over time the area became home to a rather large and diverse Jewish community. They spoke a dialect called Judeo-Malayalam, Malayalam being the native tongue of Kerala. Another group of Jews emigrated from European countries such as Holland and Spain in the 18th Century, bringing the Ladino language and Sephardic customs.

Most of the Jews have left, mainly for Israel, but Jew Town, as it is called, remains. The only remaining synagogue that is still an active house of prayer is the beautiful Paradesi Synagogue.

Built on land given by Rama Varma, the Raja of Kochi, in 1567, it contains many beautiful antiques including a floor of individually unique handmade blue and white willow-patterned porcelain Chinese tiles. There is also a rug, which was a gift from Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia.

India might be the only country in the world that has not only welcomed Jews for thousands of years, but also where they have never been subjected to anti-Semitism from their fellow Indians.

From Cochin I made my way down to Trivandrum and further down to the Kovalam Beach. Located at the very bottom of India, the beach is beautiful. I got a room in a little hotel on the beach for about a dollar.

Back then Trivandrum was slow and easy; I spent time on the beach and enjoyed South Indian meals with masala dosa, sambhar and coconut chutney, other curries, accompaniments and rice served on a banana leaf.

Walking down the beach one evening I was approached by a young man who asked if I wanted a lobster dinner. He showed me the shellfish, which I think were actually a type of crayfish, and we agreed on a price, five rupees, which was about 60 cents.

I sat on the beach while he built a fire, boiled the lobster, made rice and other accompaniments. He then laid out a cloth on the beach, some dishes, and served me. It was delicious.

Not long after I had arrived in Cochin I started to get sick. In Trivandrum my ear started hurting. It kept getting worse, and in Kovalam I developed a high fever, the whole side of my face swelled up and my ear and jaw hurt really bad. I went to see a doctor. He said I had a bad ear infection that could become meningitis. He gave me an injection with a really long needle that hurt quite a bit. When I asked him what that was for, he smiled, shook his head in that distinct Indian way, and said, "It is for pain."

"Well, it worked," I smiled back, rubbing my arm. He also gave me some antibiotics and told me to keep the ear dry for six months. I thanked him and left as a rat scampered out of the corner of the waiting room.

My next stop was Goa.

Goa was different from the rest of India. It was a Portuguese colony until 1961, and the Catholic influence, including conversion, had an effect on Goa quite different from the Church of England's more benign presence in



the rest of the country.

When I arrived in Goa's capital, Panjim, I met a man at the station who offered me a room in Calangute Beach. I was always wary of touts offering rooms, or anything else, but I trusted this guy enough to at least go and see. The room was upstairs in a large house. It was a short walk to the beach and the Bella Vista Restaurant, for 10 rupees, less than a dollar back then.

The bathroom was off a courtyard downstairs. There was no running water. The well in the courtyard was deep and good, and to take a shower I'd fill a bucket at the well, pour it into a cistern, get under it and open the valve. It worked just fine.

Goa has a beautiful coastline, and the white sand beach at Calangute was long and wide.

When I was there, in 1979 – 80, it was a hippie haven. Europeans would come en masse during the winter months. Drugs were freely available. The broad beaches were the scene of nudity, drug taking, and every full moon and for Christmas and New Years Eve there would be huge all-night raves at Anjuna Beach.

Rock bands would come over from Europe. I heard Ian Dury's "Sex, Drugs and Rock & Roll" so much it became a soundtrack. A bandstand would be set up on the beach, with a dance floor. Indians would set up chai and food stalls scattered along the beach, which was speckled by what looked like thousands of candles flickering in the sand. Each candle surrounded by groups of travelers, you'd hear the cry, "Boom Shankar," and chillums would swirl around what seemed like a million circles.

In the morning the sun would rise on a gypsy encampment. Blankets, sarongs, lungis and mats spread on the beach. Everywhere glitter and satiny sparkle, as sunrise chillums are passed around candles melted into the sand and still burning against the new sunlight. People dance, some strip and run into the sea, others turn over in their sleep.

One party we had was at Aronbol, where there was a lake close to the sea. Some of the tribe had set up an elaborate structure where they were living. We could swim in the lake, and the ocean. The palm trees and sand made it look like an oasis in an Arabian nights tale.

Often when I think of Goa from that period I think of the term Woodstock Nation realized. In many ways that's how it seemed. People dressed in their fantasy of hippie nation, with loose fitting, colorful Indian cottons, with turbans and headscarves, bare feet and jewelry. There was all the dope you could want or need, good cheap food and accommodation. As I said, nudity, although frowned upon by the Indian authorities, was commonplace.

I had several encounters and liaisons in Goa, including Wendy the Acid Queen. Wendy would come over every year from London, with plenty of psychedelics, and have a house in Goa. We had a brief but memorable liaison. Roger Moore and a film crew were there making a film, "The Sea Wolves," and we partied at Wendy's house.

I forget the names of the three Americans I met there. A couple of them landed roles as extras in the film. There were travelers/tourists. They were the only Americans I remember meeting in two years of travel in India.

I liked the American guys, but there was a strange distance and closeness between us. To me, they seemed just

too straight, too establishment. Of course my reasoning for this was often ridiculous. I remember that they would brush their teeth every night before going to bed. I thought this was somehow not cool. Like they were still doing the bidding of their parents, otherwise why would you brush your teeth at night as well as in the morning? Don't ask me what I was thinking. I brushed my teeth, but only in the morning. Like I said, I was nuts and this just confirms it. Now I often brush my teeth three times a day and floss religiously.

This straightness, squareness or ordinariness was evident in other ways, too, and that was the cause of the distance between us. The closeness was the exact opposite. As cool as I was, or thought I was, and I was a totally irresponsible drug addict, a lot of the other travelers, from other countries, were just too cool or trying to be too cool. They didn't talk, not about themselves, their families, their thoughts, dreams, nothing. These uncool Americans were real.

When I arrived in Goa I had what was left of that kilo of grass that I'd bought down in Kerala. But I didn't really like it that much. The hash available in Goa was much better. There was a young Indian woman in Goa that used to make cakes and sell them for a few rupees, and I had her bake up some of the grass, which was some pretty potent pastry. I decided to sell the remainder of the grass to a French hippie and his girlfriend who wanted it.

After the transaction was complete he asked me if I was really Abbie Hoffman. I think it was a combination of the scars from my motorcycle accident being fresher and more obvious than they are now, plus the fact that I did resemble Hoffman somewhat, and that he was on the run from the law and had supposedly had plastic surgery. I assured my French friends that I wasn't, but I don't think they believed me. They may still be telling the story of how they bought marijuana from Abbie Hoffman in India.

I remember Scottish Steve and his girlfriend, Glenda. The Indian police would sometimes come to the beach and hassle people who were sunbathing nude. One time they started warning Steve to put on his clothes or they would arrest him.

He started in on them, saying, in his thick Scottish accent, "Oh no, the shame of it, I can't take it; I'm going to kill myself; I'll drown myself."

And with that outburst Steve, who was more than six-feet tall, ran to the shoreline, fell to his knees, and placed his nose and mouth in the few inches of water lapping the shore, all the time screaming, "This is it, I can't stand the shame!"

The craziest part was the police reaction. They grabbed him gently by the shoulders, trying to lift his face out of the water, saying, "Oh no, sahib, please don't be doing such a thing," and basically pampering Steve, who agreed to forgo suicide if they would just leave him alone.

While the Indian police would sometimes hassle us for nudity, the Indian tourist industry would take middle-class Indian gentlemen down to gawk. On one such occasion there were a couple of Indian men enjoying the view when one of the tribe, a very attractive and also muscular German girl, got up from the sand, completely naked, walked over to the Indian men, picked one of them up and lifted him above her head like a barbell. She then walked over to the shoreline and tossed him into the sea. His extreme embarrassment was both painful and hilarious to watch.

There was really a community at the beach. We came from all over the world, England, Scotland, Ireland, Ger-



many, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Holland, France, Belgium, Brazil, and more. When we weren't partying, or lying in the sun, everyone in our community on Calangute Beach would gather at the Bella Vista restaurant. The Bella Vista was right on the beach. There were a few tables inside, but most of us could always be found surrounding the tables out on the large verandah in front, eating drinking, smoking dope, listening to music and just hanging out.

I spent long periods of time largely cut off from world events, but word went around that the Russians had invaded Afghanistan on December 25, 1979, and we had celebrated a New Years Eve/End of the World party to usher in 1980.

The world didn't end, and on January 1, there were candles dancing against the sunrise as we passed chillums around our circle of friends.

It's strange to think how this disparate group of people from every corner of the world, some professionals, such as doctors and accountants, taking a few weeks to a month to escape the ordinary, others hippie travelers, who had been making their way throughout parts of Asia for years, dope dealers, thieves, musicians, movie stars and vagabond wanderers, all shared for a brief moment a glimpse of the Age of Aquarius.

I had been in Goa for a couple of months, but as February approached I had to begin my journey out of India. My last visa extension was going to soon expire, and I had to leave the country for six months before I could reenter. My vague plan was to catch the steamer that sailed up the Arabian Sea to Bombay, and get a room in a hotel recommended to me by a fellow traveler, appropriately or ironically called The Rex. I'd then take a train across the breadth of India to Calcutta, from where I would make my way over to Thailand.

After smoking a lot of hash and chasing the dragon with Steve and Glenda, I spent my last night in Goa at Wendy's. All I remember of that night is her removing my lungi, stepping back and looking me up and down, and saying, "I'm going to make you scream."

The next morning I floated my way back to my room, gathered my belongings up into my pack, and took off for the docks to catch the steamer to Bombay.