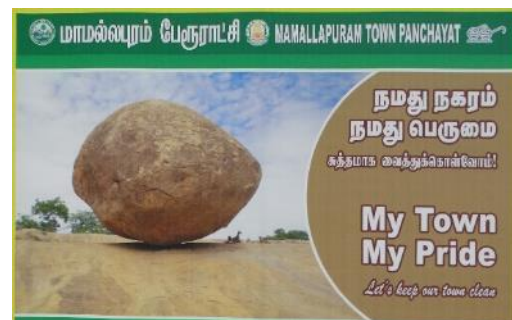
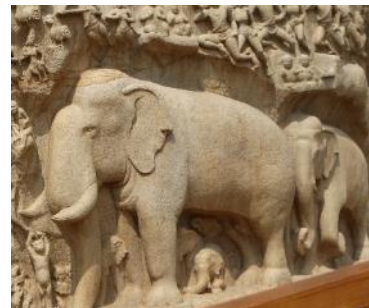


TEMPLES, TEA, WILDLIFE, PALACES AND MORE, A SOUTHERN INDIA CIRCUIT January 2020

After visiting Mumbai and before Calcutta and Bangladesh, my friend and I spent 17 days in November, 2019 on a more or less classic tour of southern India covering about 1750 km with our own car and driver (see map but without the southern extension to Kovalam or northwest to Hassan).



We started in Chennai (ex-Madras) in Tamil Nadu state having arrived by overnight train from Mumbai (ex-Bombay). Our first night was spent in a restored villa in the French Quarter of Pondicherry. We stopped along the way at the 7th C temples of the Pallava kings on the Bay of Bengal coast at Mahabalipuram. This dynasty ruled most of southern India from the 3rd to 9th C.



As we had seen in Mumbai, the campaigns to make communities cleaner will be seen also throughout the South.

We drove through the Pondicherry fishermen's village to the port late in the afternoon where the principal activities were net mending and the arrival of what appeared to be soft shell crabs.



Because it is an interest of both of us, we organized the itinerary to focus heavily on artisans. So, in keeping with India's focus on recycling and elimination of single-use plastic, the first product we saw were sturdy baskets woven by women from recycled plastic sacks (rice, etc.).



Other than in a few areas, rice was the prevalent crop and during the visit we saw everything from planting, thinning, and harvesting to use of the residual stalks.





India is self-sufficient in rice and exports primarily to Asia (65%), Saudi Arabia (16%) and Iran (11%).

Sugar cane is also common. In 2018 India was the fourth largest exporter in dollar volume after



Brazil, Thailand and France.

Other than humans, white oxen working in pairs are a mainstay of the agricultural workforce.



Rivers, canals, ponds (known as tanks if man-made), ditches and puddles are seemingly everywhere, with or without dams and with many uses.



Unfortunately, often one of those uses is as a repository for garbage.

Many of the joys of a road trip such as this are the stops that are not on the itinerary such as this banana, fruit and vegetable market.



In addition to a different language (and script) in almost every state, other distinctions emerge. In Tamil Nadu, Hindu temples frequently have a Gopuram of an ornate trapezoid shape at the entrances. Another facet of Tamil Nadu is that the taxes on wine are very high (58%!).



On route to Tanjore we visited the Chola temple Gangaikonda Cholapuram, built in 1025 by the son of the first Chola emperor when he moved the capital from Tanjore. Highlights include exterior carvings, a massive Nandi (Shiva's vehicle) and a lion guard.



At a nearby silk weaving work-shop a silk scarf representing 15 days' labor sold for about \$100.



In addition to Hindu temples we are seeing mosques and various Christian denominations throughout the trip. The Muslim women don't wear a sari, but a headscarf and various types of long garment. The men don't wear a lungi, but pants and often a skullcap. The Muslim population of India, about 200 million (or 14% of the population), is about equal to that of Pakistan, less than that of Indonesia, the largest Muslim population in the world, and greater than that of Bangladesh.



Brihadishwara Temple, in Tanjore (also known as Thanjavur), was built by Raja Raja Chola I, a dynasty that carried Hinduism beyond India. A major festival was underway so I contented myself with enjoying the perimeter with frescoes depicting Hindu mythology and lingams (a symbol of Shiva), visiting idols (no photos) and responding to requests by people to photograph them! An obvious dignitary paid a brief visit.



We visited a lost-wax bronze casting artisan and learned the entire process. During our visit he carved a small hand from the mix of bees-wax and tree gum used to create molds for the bronze pieces and he kindly gave it to me!





Our next stop is Trichy, the geographic center of Tamil Nadu. The Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple complex at 155 acres may be the largest active Hindu temple in the world. (Angkor Wat is larger). The complex, built on an island as a temple town, has 81 shrines (49 dedicated to Vishnu), 21 towers and 39 pavilions. It is designed with seven concentric rectangular enclosures, each with its own gopuram (the inner two reserved to Hindus only).



One of the most beautiful parts to me was the 16th C Sesa Mandap, a pillared hall of sculpted rearing battle horses and Vishnu's ten incarnations.



Despite the large number of visitors, the immensity of the space easily absorbed the activity and background music/chanting kept the visit pleasant.



Along our route we encountered an Ayyarau Shrine. These shrines to the main Tamil god protecting a village are usually located in the woods and abound with offerings to thank the god. In this case the offerings were

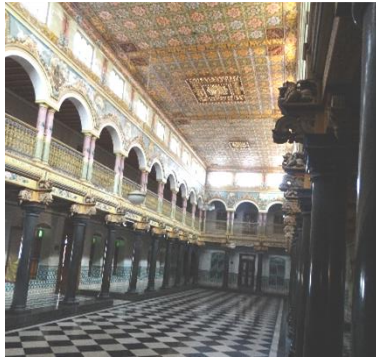


primarily of terracotta horses.

Our next stop was the Chettinad region, an area of wealthy Tamil merchants and financiers from the late 19th C to after WWII who were active throughout all parts of Asia. They built huge ornate houses incorporating art and architecture from Asia and Europe. The area, located about 90kms equidistant from Trichy, Madurai and Tanjore fell into disuse and it was only beginning in about 2007 with the support of ArcHe-S, a French/Tamil Nadu NGO, and UNESCO New Delhi, that the potential of these splendid properties, once restored, began to be exploited.



The layouts are similar with a huge, ornate, welcome reception room, then an open-air central courtyard, the core of the family home, (now surrounded by bedrooms similar to the Moroccan



ryad). Here are samples of the beautiful rooms, tiles, carvings, and chandeliers.



Some are open for visits and some are now active B&Bs while others are once again private homes. Many of the villages in Chettinad have developed walking tours and the region is now included in the World Heritage Tentative List of India.

Laxmi, the goddess of money, is the patron of this area and is featured on many facades.



An artisan product of this region are hand-made tiles especially from Athangui.



We visited a factory to see the process of laying the molds on glass and adding the glazes. They are then cured in water for 3 days. The process is inspired by the Maastricht process.

Madurai, in the heart of Tamil Nadu, is its second-largest (1.6 million) and oldest city. It was trading with Rome before Madras was even dreamed of. Its name stems from the god Shiva showering drops of nectar (madhuram) from his locks. We are here on a Friday and traffic is at a standstill, especially with road construction. Actually, almost every day we are departing or entering a city at rush hour with students heading to/from schools, interesting buses



(the colorfully decorated ones are the privately-operated inter-city lines), and general bedlam.



One of our other planning requests had been to eat at places where locals eat, not where tour buses stop. This is a typical example.



We needed to buy a replacement hair curling iron and on one street there were at least 200 (numbered) stalls selling tech products.

At the Meenakshi Amman Temple, all bags and cameras had to be checked and a dress code was enforced. So, here is a stock photo. There is an evening procession with elephants

carrying the gods which I had found impressive on my prior visit. However, the weather turned very rainy so we did not go.



A highlight was an early morning walk (5:30 am) in the Monakam neighborhood as it was waking up. Milk is the cash income here but a man milking his cow didn't want me to photo



them, fearful it would sour the milk. The women are up early to wash the front steps and create beautiful welcoming designs known as kolams. They then sell the milk while the cows go forage and later return to their own shelters to be fed.



The houses have toilets indoors (bucket flush) but water is sourced from communal water faucets which are also a social place.



Individual altars and temples abound. We passed a banana market complete with a ripening room heated by cow dung. The huge flower market has 200 vendors, the wholesale fruit and vegetable markets are open 24 hours and there is also a spice market.



From Madurai we are heading to the Periyar Wildlife Reserve.

We had seen posters on our invitations to weddings with pictured as well as many of As today was an auspicious passing many weddings and so

walk that are actual the bride and groom the groom's attendants. day for weddings we were we stopped at one!

People were very welcoming, the bride was not smiling (nor in the photo), except for once! The women guests were wearing beautiful silk saris and lots of gold jewelry. We stayed to watch many garlands being placed on the bride and groom while lots of photos were taken.



Somewhat further on we pass another ceremony of little girls whose heads are shaved and they are getting their ears pierced. This is one of 16 ceremonies practiced during a Hindu's lifespan and usually happens at age 3 or 5 years (it must be an odd-numbered age).

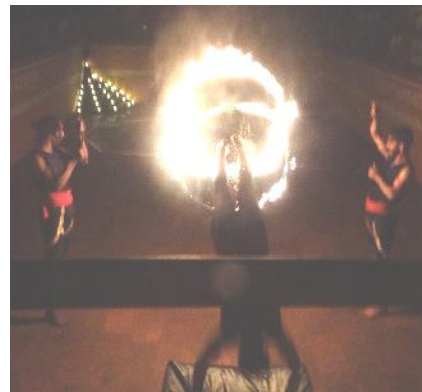
We arrive in time for our 3:30 to 5:00 pm scheduled boat ride on the lake.



White egret, woolly-necked stork, cormorants with nests and small songbirds were among the birds observed. Also, a large lizard and a herd of native Indian bison (gaur), black with white legs. Then, just at dusk a family of elephants arrived. Lens totally open, boat vibrating, but at least one photo gives the idea. This is an important elephant preserve and 35 Bengal tigers are also known to reside in the sanctuary.



Then on to a demonstration of Kalarippayattu, the martial arts form of Kerala, the state we are now in. This may be the oldest and most scientific of its kind in the world, the men attacking with long and short sticks, daggers, swords, long metal poles and cloth belts. They dive through rings of fire at the conclusion of the demonstration. There are also healing and spiritual elements to this traditional practice.



We are staying in Thekkady, a tourist town. I see the masks for sale that we have seen multiple times on buildings. It is supposed to be welcoming, but doesn't seem so to me, so I won't add one to my mask collection.



The next morning (day 9) we are headed to board our traditional houseboat which will transport us slowly through the backwaters of Kerala to Alleppey. En route we pass tea plantations where we see women picking (actually shearing) the plants. Also, a lot of huge churches and roadside altars instead of Hindu shrines, but still mosques. We then notice significantly larger houses - this is also an area of rubber plantations.



Our houseboat has one bedroom, a dining room, and the front sitting area (plus bathroom kitchen, etc.). We are staffed by a captain and a cook for our slightly less than 24-hour cruise.



Photos tell the story of water-based life on the backwaters of Kerala, with boats from tiny to large. There are a number using the type of motor we called long-tail boats on the Chao Phraya



river in Bangkok. There are large taxi-boats and houseboats of all sizes.



Despite the warning, we see a man tapping a coconut tree to produce toddy.



The water is very high with some houses flooded. There are schools, a medical center, local shops. We stopped to acquire a couple of prawns to supplement our fried fish for dinner and saw a flock of eagles fishing for small fish.



All boats have to be tied up by 5:30 pm and can start up again at 8 am.



After arriving at Alleppey we visit a hand-loom factory, men weavers, cotton, silk and banana-fiber saris, lungi's and yard goods. I buy 26m of silk to hopefully make a new duvet-cover and decorative pillow covers for my bed in Paris.



Then we take a guided walk in the village of Monakodam in Thuravur. Here we are shown the



steps and tools to use all parts of a coconut. A woman is using a small motor for the spinning of the coir fibers. An 82-year-old man is weaving coir door mats on a loom. He makes 3-4 mats per day earning in total about the equivalent of \$5.00.



As we leave the village, we wait at a railroad crossing where the manual gate mechanisms were operated by a woman.



Our destination for the next two nights is Fort Cochin. As you approach you see the high-rise hotels of Kochi, but historic Fort Cochin is pedestrian-friendly with many heritage properties. When I visited in 2009 there was a strike so many things were closed and as it was the Sabbath the Synagogue was off limits, so I was happy to return. The Jewish history in Fort Cochin dates back to at least the 5th C and for a thousand years they had a colony, known variously as Cranganore, Muzhiris or Shingly, ruled over by their own prince. A series of murals in the outer room thoroughly chronicle this history (I sneaked a photo of one). I bought postcards to photo of the interior worship hall which dates from 1568 with beautiful Belgian glass chandeliers and the 1100 hand painted floor tiles from China (each one a unique pattern) installed in 1762. It is the oldest Synagogue in the Commonwealth Nations.



Fort Cochin is famous for its Chinese fishing nets brought in 1400 by traders from the court of Kublai Khan and used throughout the Kerala backwaters (and as I saw, also in Bangladesh). It takes 5-6 people to operate the cantilevered weights used to raise and lower them and it must be high tide. It didn't look as if much was being caught the morning of our visit.



We happened upon an unusual and beautiful Church – St Thomas Koonan Kurishu Old Syrian Orthodox Church, on a sacred site dating from 1653. The building, rebuilt in 2016, is of Nubian

architecture style, made of clay bricks with beautiful stained-glass windows.



The hand-laundry (updated to its current modern facility in 1976) Dhoby Khana, was started by the Dutch in 1720 who brought people from other parts of Tamil Nadu and Malabar to launder the Dutch army uniforms. The business continues to this day as a cooperative with beautifully-ironed and packaged final outputs.



Throughout India I found people hard at work at all sorts of professions in unassuming places. This is the Brothers Automotive Engineering Works.



At the Greenix Cultural Center we enjoyed a Kathakali performance. For the first hour one actor is having his mask applied directly to his face while the other main character is



applying his(her) makeup. The Hindu epic story is acted out largely using the eyes to a background of drums. Twelve years of training are required to obtain this skill.



There also is a nice exhibit at the center of the various Kerala performance types.



After the performance we treated ourselves to an excellent dinner at Malabar Junction in Malabar House property, with contemporary

Hotel, a "Glorious Hotels of India" decor in an 18th C heritage building.

We depart Fort Cochin for a very long coast, then rice paddies. As we cross to see the trapezoid gopurams again. mountain road with lots of trucks and at 2200m elevation. Two weeks prior the road was closed due to mudslides from heavy rains, the effects of which we continue to see two days later as we head north. Massive

day's drive, first along the back into Tamil Nadu we begin We are climbing on a twisting buses to the hill town of Ooty,



reconstruction is underway.

In Ooty, the 55-acre botanical garden (started as a vegetable garden in 1848) is beautifully maintained. A woman was sweeping leaves out from under a tree and lots of hand trimming was occurring. There is a planted map of India and another of the seal of Tamil Nadu plus trees and plants from around the world.



We are going to descend the route we came up last night on the scenic mountain train from Ooty (also known as Udhagamandalam) to Mettupalayam. The Nilgiris Mtn Railway was first envisaged in 1854 but took until 1899 to be opened and was finally extended to Ooty in 1908.

The 46 km ascent requires 4.8 hours, the descent 3.6 hours. Steam locomotive powers the train from Mettupalayam up to Coonoor where the engine is changed to diesel. We are fortunate that today is the first day the train is again operating after the mudslides, but the first-class compartment does not actually have very good access for photography.



However, since in total we traversed this route four times we manage to obtain some photos of views and, of course, monkeys.



Many of the multi-colored hill towns remind me of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and one, in particular, with mostly yellow houses advertising “colors” stood out – perhaps a company town?



Our visit to Highfield tea plantation starts in fog and rain which, fortunately, clears away. As a tea drinker I have wanted for a long time to do a tour to learn the process as I have done with coffee, chocolate, vanilla and various other spices. This Nilgiris region is known for spicy teas. The plantation employs 200 people, 100 in the fields and 100 in the factory, who live on the property in a family village. Their housing, electricity, medical care, children’s education and first pregnancy expenses are paid for by the plantation.

A tea plant will produce for 100 years and the hillsides are interplanted with the Silver Oak tree from Australia to provide shade during the dry season without competing for water and nutrients due to its deep root.



The pickers pick from 8-12 with a tea break at 10, and then from 1-4. On the first day they pick only the new buds, from which white tea is made. The goal is 100 grams (~ ¼ lb) for which they are paid 800 rupees (~\$12.00). On day two they hand pick the top two new, light green leaves, from which the quality teas are made. Their tea plants are Chinese and Assam. On day three they use the shears and this output (goal 35 kilos for 300 rupees) is ground, fermented and roasted to become chai. Every 10-15 days the plant is ready to be picked again, year around. The pickers now use large sacks, better ergonomically than the prior head-hung baskets.

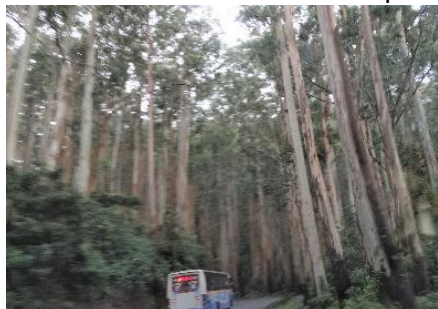
The two tender leaves spend an hour air drying, then are steamed 10-15 minutes, then hand rolled, and then dried in a dryer like the ones we used to dry fruit slices in!



For the flavored teas the flavor is added at packing. Our guide says that loose tea is always the first quality and bags are often just the dust, no leaves. This plantation also produces oils, such as eucalyptus, and chocolate.



Once again, we drive the mountain road up through Ooty and onwards towards Mysore through the beautiful Nilgiris hills with pine forests and the Pykara recreation area. As it is Saturday there are lots of day trippers, busloads of families and school groups, as we encountered at our lunch stop.



Roadside stands are selling garden produce, and carrots seem to be the “in” product at the moment. This was to me one of the most beautiful drives of the entire trip.

As we traversed the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve we saw lots of spotted deer (chital),



plus elephants with their mahouts bathing in the river, and an elephant on its own.



Guided safaris are possible here (we were not permitted to stop or exit our car), visits to the elephant camp and lodging are available. This is part of the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve straddling Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu states and home to approximately 585 tigers, the world's single largest population. It has a very rich diversity of both flora and fauna and is also a plastic-free zone.

Arriving in Mysore about 6 pm we head directly to the Devaraja market open from 6 am to 8:30 pm. The core market is about 500m long, covers 3 acres, and was created during the reign of



Tipu Sultan in the 18th C. In addition to wholesale areas there are 1400 stalls organized by product. So, for example, in the temple aisle you find red and white cotton lace garlands that goddesses like, plus inexpensive leaves to intersperse when making flower garlands. Women take sweet fruits, especially bananas and coconuts to the temple to be blessed before bringing them home to



serve to the family. Fruit vendors also sell the plastic baskets in which to leave fruit offerings at

the temple. Mounds of kum kum, the colored powder used at the Holi festival and for decorating entrances, are available as well as incense.



Then there is the marriage aisle. According to our guide, to be marriageable a girl must be slim, fair skinned and have long hair (braid for Hindu loose for Muslim). So, 3-month herbal cleansing diet products, a variety of turmeric to lighten the face, and false hair are found here. It turns out India and Thailand are the world's largest exporters of human hair. Spices and herbs are of



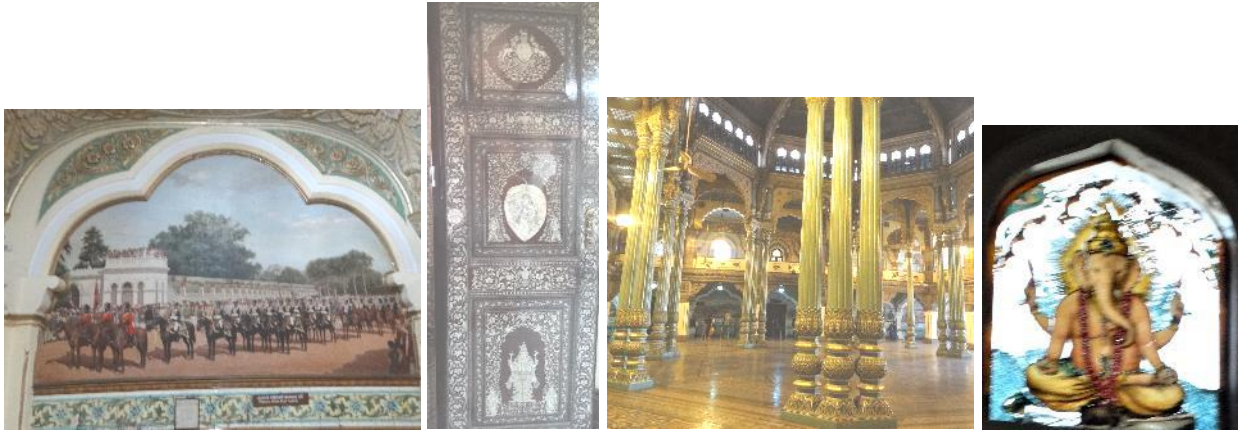
course also here as well as the cows. One is eating the grass from the birdbath on the clock tower square while another is indulging in the fruit and vegetable scraps inside.

Across the country we have seen hanging rows of single dose beauty products. However, a year from now, all sachets will be banned as well as most plastic containers, a big step for a country with 1/6th of the planet's population.

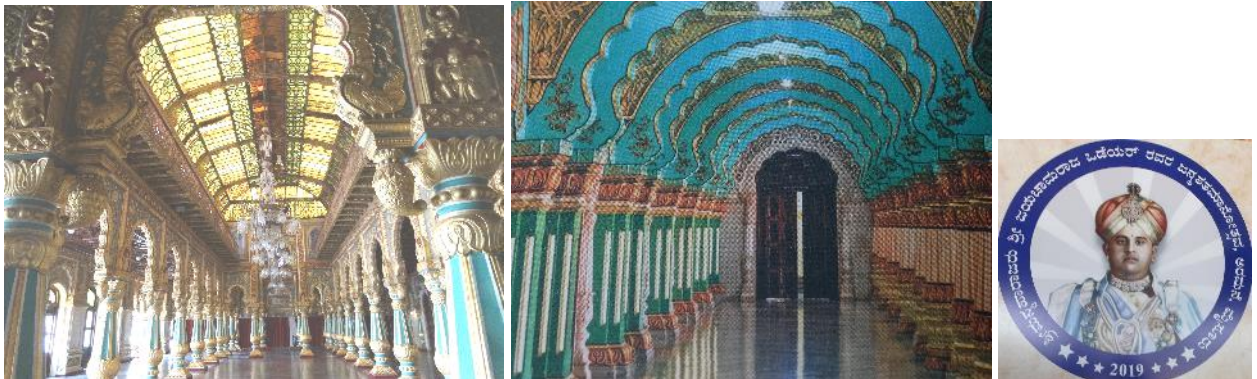


Mysore (population 1.1 million) has preserved a wealth of heritage buildings, mostly owned by the state (we are in Karnataka) and used for hospitals, schools and universities and government buildings. The original Sultan's Palace was lost to fire in 1897 and today's, designed in Indo-Saracen style by British architect Henry Irwin, was completed in 1912. It is the second most-visited site in India after the Taj Mahal and was closed during my 2009 visit.

Every surface is covered with wall paintings of life during the Raj, stained glass, mirrors, mosaic floors, silver doors, carved wooden doors, and wall and ceiling carvings.



The private Durbar (audience) hall with its stained glass ceiling and glass chandeliers is one of several magnificent rooms. The public Durbar hall with its turquoise ceiling is also stunning. The most recent titular head of the Wodeyar family, which ruled Mysore from 1399 to



independence, was crowned in 2015 at 23 years of age.

We are fortunate to be here on a Sunday because promptly at 7 pm for 10 minutes the palace and grounds are lighted with 100,000 white lights.



Mysore is also known for sandalwood products including incense sticks produced as a cottage industry by women in their homes, intricately carved sandalwood figurines (very expensive) and a government factory (high security, no photos) dating from 1909 producing the oil to be used



in soaps and other products. The tour taught me that the oil extraction process is very similar to the distillation of alcoholic spirits such as scotch whiskey.

Our final day will bring us to Bangalore where after a hotel night we will board our overnight train to Kolkata. En route we stop at Somanatipur Kesara Temple which dates from 1258 and where pilgrims and school groups are visiting. However, here photos of the idols are permitted and there are very intricate ceiling carvings.



Along all of these kilometers we have never lacked for roadside services. Coffee is available in various forms, as are stalls for buying snacks. Our driver always managed to find a gas station with clean western toilets when needed.



As there is no Walmart, in the more rural areas many products are found for sale on the



roadside.

These women are selling the pads to use on your head when carrying head loads.



And this woman is not only selling hanging chairs, but making them as well!

In case we were in need of inspiration, lively Hindu shrines abound.



The island community of Srirangapatna near Mysore, which was the de facto capital of much of southern India in the 18th C, is our final visit. A handsome mosque is the first building we encounter and some very friendly female worshippers chat as we are taking photos, asking where are we from, etc. etc.



Here are also the burial plot of Tipu Sultan, the remains of the fort accessed through tunnels, several important temples, and dungeons.

However, we are interested in the summer palace built largely of teak in 1784. Wall murals illustrate the Sultan's many campaigns against the British in great detail. Also, his defeat in 1799 with the help of the French. There are teak and rosewood carvings throughout the palace, set in beautifully manicured grounds. We eat lunch at the local village restaurant before continuing on to Bangalore.



The approach to Bangalore takes forever as not only is there construction to extend the metro, but there has been an accident.

And then we read in the newspaper the next morning that politicians were out on the streets and the main train station which had a ripple effect on traffic.

And so, as our Indian Panorama tour organizer sums it up, we leave southern India with many fond memories!



