

A Railroad Less Traveled

Riding the Rails in Southern India

By Paul Wainwright

The British gave to India two things that unified the country: the English Language, and a railroad. While there are 23 major local languages in India distributed mostly by state (and hundreds of regional languages and dialects), English is the language of India's national government, and is understood by most educated people. And in a land where roads are poor and private cars are owned by only a few, the Indian Railway is the method of choice for Indian travelers.

Oh yes, I suppose there is a third thing the British gave India to unite the country: Cricket. Indians are as devoted to cricket as Americans are to baseball, football, and basketball combined.

Today, India is a unique destination for Americans who want a truly "foreign" experience. While English is relatively well understood compared with many exotic foreign destinations, the customs and cultures of India are vastly different from our own. Nowhere is this more true than in southern India.

Most foreign tourists in India travel in the northern part of the country. Delhi, with its abundance of flights, and with the Taj Majal reachable in a day trip, seems to be the prime destination for most Americans. However, there are vast parts of India where foreigners rarely visit. If you have a spirit for adventure, then southern India offers the experience of a lifetime.

I have traveled to the southern Indian cities of Chennai and Bangalore on several occasions. I am both a lover of foreign cultures, and of trains, so it was only natural to take some time and see some of the country by rail.

Chennai – named Madras by the British – is an excellent point for starting such a journey. It is growing as a destination for international flights, and several international carriers offer flights via European cities. Chennai is also a major rail hub. The Indian Railway is divided into various divisions, and the Southern Railway offers numerous excursions that start and end in Chennai.

Before beginning my rail journey, I spent several days in Chennai while I adjusted to the 10.5 hour time difference. India spans two of the world's time zones. Rather than add even more confusion to a place that seems chaotic enough already, the country has adopted a single time zone that is in between

the two zones that would naturally occur. In the winter, India is 10.5 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time. Since India does not observe Daylight Savings time, the summer difference is 9.5 hours.

One of the points of interest in Chennai is an enormous Banyan tree – a tree that spreads by dropping roots from its branches, which eventually grow to form multiple trunks. I was told that this Banyan tree was the third largest in the world, behind ones in Mumbai and Maui. While there I encountered two groups of high school aged children – boys and girls, who are not only educated separately in southern Indian society, but who live very separate lives until they become adults. I had a wonderful conversation with a group of the girls, who were very shy about speaking English. Although it was obvious they had studied English for many years, it was quite possible that I was the first American they had ever spoken with.

In Southern India, marriages are still mostly arranged by the parents. The newspapers have large sections of personal ads which are quite different from what you would find in this country. Instead of “women looking for men” and “men looking for women,” these ads are categorized by “brides looking for grooms” and “grooms looking for brides.” They are further broken down by caste, and contain information about education, employment, and skills.

Also in Chennai there is a wonderful animal park with various native animals on display. The most memorable of these was a 3 year old elephant named Indira. She had been trained by her handler to perform a special trick for tourists with cameras. She would get all four feet on top of a small platform, and just as the unsuspecting tourist raised his camera to take a picture, she would point her trunk at the visitor and blow water and God knows what else all over him and his camera. I, unfortunately, fell for this too.

As with everything else in India, there are many levels of service available on the Indian Railway. The “Palace on Wheels” is perhaps the best known train in India, but the trains that most people use, while far less opulent, offer a range of classes at extremely reasonable rates. For example, a week-long journey through the part of India to the south of Chennai costs about \$175 for a private, air-conditioned room (see *If You Go* below). If you are interested in coach accommodations – which will be crowded – you can put together an itinerary yourself for considerably less.

For my journey, I chose first to go to Bangalore, about 5 hours to the west of Chennai. Bangalore is where India’s famous Kingfisher beer is brewed, and is also known as the “Silicon Valley” of India. Many hi-tech firms have set up offices there, and there are many Indian firms that provide engineering services for large international companies. Electricity is an interesting challenge for such firms, since power outages are a common occurrence. Consequently, companies that do software development have very large diesel-powered

generators which they operate continuously. During my stay in Bangalore it was common for the power to go out several times each day. The only exception seemed to be the railroads, and I suspect that they have priority when electricity resources are stretched thin.

Despite its fast growth, there are many parks and open spaces in Bangalore. Popular destinations include Lalbagh Garden and Bannerghata National Park.

Since my stay in Bangalore was on a weekend, I searched out a place to go to church on Sunday – not an easy task in a place where Christians make up less than 1% of the population. Fortunately for me, the Anglican Church of South India (CSI) has its center in Bangalore, and St. Mark's cathedral – modest by Western standards – is located there. I was struck both by the similarities to and differences from churches in the United States. Among the differences were a group of lepers who sat at the gate begging.

The particular Sunday of my visit was the conclusion of an Anglican women's conference from all over the diocese, and for me the experience was a wonderful fashion show of the most beautiful saris. Also that day two young men were baptized in an outdoor pool, and it was fascinating to imagine the depth of conviction these two must have had in a society that is mostly Hindu and Muslim.

While in Bangalore, I told my hotel that I would like to visit to a small village, and they arranged for a car to take me to Kengeri, a farming town along the road to Mysore. After some initial suspicious glances, I was warmly welcomed as a visitor to their village. Westerners are rare in this place, but I was warmly received by the villagers, who had as much curiosity about me as I had about them.

For the most part, Indian people do not mind being photographed. I was told that many people feel it is an honor if a foreigner is interested enough in them to take their picture. There is a universal hand gesture in India – both palms together with the fingers pointing up while nodding your head – that means both “thank you” and “I respect you.” After photographing someone I would make this gesture, and was usually greeted with the same in return – and a smile.

After my stay in Bangalore I was on to Mysore, known for its palaces and its soap. During this 2 hour train ride, several Indians introduced me to the art of hanging out of the train's door for a better look at the countryside. In the States this would not only be impossible but probably also illegal. But in India it is common – and fun! It was a beautiful day in April (the beginning of the hottest part of the year), and I was overwhelmed with the experience of traveling through this very foreign land. At one point we crossed a trestle over a river. Several women were washing clothes in the water while their children played nearby. I waved at the children, and they waved back. For a fleeting moment it seemed like our two worlds had been joined.

There are several gauges of track used by the Indian railway. The most common is called broad gauge, and the rails are 5' 6" apart (somewhat wider than the 4' 8.5" in the United States). Another popular gauge is called meter gauge, in which the rails are (you guessed it) one meter (about 39") apart. Then there are various forms of narrow gauge lines – anything smaller than a meter. In many places, broad gauge and meter gauge will share the same right-of-way, with one rail being used by both size trains, and separate rails for the opposite train wheel, depending on which gauge train it is. Such an arrangement can be seen at the Mysore railway station.

Mysore has long been a place of royalty. The earliest Hindu temple in Mysore dates back to the year 950 AD, and the Mysore dynasty has had a succession of palaces there since 1399. The current palace, completed in 1912, is a massive 3 story granite structure with towers and a domed roof. Not only is the building itself very impressive, but visitors are treated to a wonderful collection of Indian art and artifacts housed inside.

Besides touring the palace, Mysore is famous for its zoo. Its sub-tropical climate makes it an ideal location to house a very complete collection of Asian animals, including a particularly memorable collection of snakes.

From Mysore I traveled by car to the city of Udhagamandalam – thankfully known simply as Ooti. Ooti is a “hill station,” which is a place where Indians go to during the hot summer months to escape the heat. Ooti is located near the summit of 8640 foot Mt. Dodabetta.

I should probably mention driving in India. While I'm sure there are laws and customs that prevent the various assortments of cars, trucks, motor cycles, and 3-wheeled taxis from running into each other, these methods are not at all apparent to a Westerner. Besides driving on the left (another “gift” from the British), traffic lanes and other laws seem to be provided as rough guidelines only, and if a driver feels hindered by one of these regulations he simply ignores them. Honking horns do not mean the same as they do here in the States. Everyone honks all the time, and it seems to be a way of saying to the other drivers: “I see you – I'll try not to hit you, and I kindly request that you try not to hit me.” Crossing the street is enough of a challenge, let alone trying to drive in it. Your hotel can help you hire a car, and it is fairly reasonable (about \$20 per day).

After a brief overnight stay in Ooti, I had planned to travel on the narrow gauge diesel powered train to Coonoor, where I would board the steam-powered cog railway in a steep down hill ride to Mettupalayam. However, heavy rains the night before had interrupted service on the steam line, so I took the diesel train back to Ooti where I could get a bus. During this return diesel ride to Ooti, I managed to talk the engineer into letting me ride in the cab with him. I was

carrying with me an interesting collection of my photos of American railroads, and it's amazing what a nice photograph of a steam locomotive on the Durango & Silverton Railway will get you in India.

The bus ride to Mettupalayam was a different story. I think of all my experiences in foreign places, this was the most foreign. I was on a public bus that was packed – and I mean packed – with people. I was the only non-local. The bus careened down a hairpin riddled road for what seemed like an eternity, seeming to barely stay on the road. It's no wonder the railroad is the preferred method for traveling in India.

From Mettupalayam, a short train ride brought me to Coimbatore, where I spent the night.

The following morning I was off again, traveling to Kodaikanal, another hill station. By now I had learned the secret of traveling in 2nd class (non-reserved) trains: arrange your trip so that you can take trains that originate from the same place you do, and get to the station about an hour early to stake out a seat. Not only does that insure a place to sit, but it also affords a wonderful opportunity to photograph people as they go about their travels.

When I planned my journey, I had intended to photograph the trains themselves – a natural thing for a train-loving photographer to do. However, I found the Indian trains to be rather un-photogenic. On the other hand, I found the people who ride the trains to be wonderful photographic subjects, and they didn't seem to mind my photographing them. You can see people on the trains from all parts of India, and you can tell where they are from by what they are wearing.

Begging is commonplace in India. Beggars can be very persuasive, and the most successful ones seem very worthy of help. However, most Indians see beggars as a nuisance, and advise against the giving of alms. This is especially important for foreigners, since giving money to one person can result in a swarm of others asking for similar donations – not unlike what happens when you feed a seagull. However, I made exceptions when I wanted to photograph a beggar. I never considered this to be charity, but rather just a “model fee.” After all, where else can you hire a model for less than 5 cents?

Kodaikanal is another Indian tourist destination with few if any western tourists. I was able to spend a considerable amount of time in the marketplace photographing people. It was Palm Sunday, and an Indian friend (who is Hindu) asked me about the significance of a palm branch that someone was carrying. I found it really difficult to explain my Christian faith “from scratch,” and it helped me to appreciate just how different southern India is from my culture.

The Hindu religion itself is a fascinating thing. It lacks the structure and organization of Western religions. There are many gods to be worshiped, and

you can see icons of these gods everywhere. One railway engineer – called a “driver” in India – had his Hindu god’s icon on a small magnet. Before beginning his journey, he placed his magnetic icon on the control stand of his locomotive, and said his prayers before departing. Religion is a central part of everyone’s life, whether Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or Christian. It is an essential part of the fabric of India’s culture, and in southern India the various religions seem to tolerate and respect each other.

One fascinating aspect of the Indian Railway is the methods they use to control the trains. In a land where modern signaling systems have been slow to evolve, a common method, which is still used today in many places, involves passing a metal disk or ball between the station master and the driver. The station’s interlocking track control cannot operate without the disk. Once it is set to allow a train to depart on a section of track, the disk is handed to the train’s driver. The train cannot be moved without a disk in place. Upon reaching the next station, the disk is handed back to the station master so that other trains can be allowed to use the section of track that has just been traveled. This crude but effective method insures that only one train will be on a section of track at one time.

From Kodaikanal, I took an overnight train to Bangalore. Most of the long-distance trains in India travel at night. I was booked in a 2nd class (but air conditioned) sleeping car. After being a little apprehensive, I stretched out on my bunk – one of 4 in the compartment – and with a little help from my doctor managed to sleep for most of the 10 hour trip. One suggestion to anyone planning an overnight trip by train in India: have your doctor prescribe something to help you sleep, and bring a chain and padlock to lock your bag to the train.

From Bangalore I returned to Chennai, and my flight home. Not only had I gained a deeper understanding of this part of the world, but also a deeper appreciation for being an American. This was, indeed, truly an experience of a lifetime.

Paul Wainwright is a fine-art photographer who lives and works in Atkinson, New Hampshire. He can be reached at paul@wainwright.mv.com . His web site is www.paulwainwrightphotography.com .

If you go:

The best time to travel to southern India is in January or February, although any time between November and March is not a bad choice. The really hot season starts in April and runs through June, when the rainy season starts. It can really rain in India. Conditions start to improve in September and October, with nice weather returning in November. My days in Bangalore in January have been like the nicest days in May here in New England.

While relatively safe for travelers, there are some things to be aware of in southern India. First, while you can't avoid the beggars, do not give them money. It's a bit like feeding seagulls. If you give money one to one, the word gets out and you will be overwhelmed. Watch your possessions, and carry your money in a safe place. If you plan to sleep on a train, lock your stuff to an immovable object, and use it as a pillow.

You also need to be a little careful about what you eat. Do not buy anything from a street vendor. Plan your meals around the availability of restaurants or hotels, and always drink bottled water that has not had the seal broken. Eating fish, even in a restaurant, is probably not a good idea because of the lack of refrigeration. Don't eat anything raw, especially salad.

You can plan your journey on the web. The Indian Railway's official web site is www.indianrail.gov.in . From there you can see train schedules and make reservations. Another useful site is the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation: www.irctc.co.in . They are a government of India enterprise that can book package tours by rail in India. For train travel starting and ending in Chennai, the state of Tamilnadu's web site offers some interesting packaged itineraries: www.tamilnadutourism.org .

There is an Indian rail fan web site and e-mail group (www.irfca.org) that has been most helpful to me. Just join the group and send e-mail asking for guidance, and you will get many responses. Indian people are very welcoming of visitors, and that goes for their web sites as well.

Hotels during my journey were:

Chennai – The Trident Hotel – near the airport.

Bangalore – The Taj West End Hotel

Ooti – The Savoy Hotel

Coimbatore – The Residency Hotel

Kodaikanal – The Carlton Hotel

These hotels – and many like them – are clean and reasonable (\$70 to \$90 per night, except for the Taj West End, which was very pricy).

My airline of choice was Lufthansa, although British Airways (and probably others) also have flights to Chennai from the United States.