

SOUTHERN INDIA



“Back So Soon?”

As you may have read about [our trip to India last year](#), it was an intense experience, in all senses of the word, both good and bad. It was difficult to visit, but the rewards were commensurate. As we sat down last September, discussing where to visit over the winter, we debated whether or not we were ready for another swing through India. We thought about taking a year off before we attempted India again. But everyone we had talked to said that southern India was very different, and very much easier to visit than the north. So we decided to give it a try. As with last year, we signed up with Intrepid Travel, this time visiting the southern India states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka.

We were pleasantly surprised. The Cochin airport, which we flew into, was relatively clean and modern, the baggage was offloaded quickly, immigration was speedy (for India), customs nary gave us a look (must be our wholesome, clean-cut appearance). Hotel taxi? *Easy*. Hotel? Clean, welcoming and with an excellent restaurant. This is *not* [Delhi](#). Actually, we found ourselves repeating that frequently during our couple of days in Cochin. "Hey, this is clean!". "Nobody has tried to scam us!". When we say "no", they don't follow us down the street to make sure we meant it (usually). We knew we had made the right choice when our tour leader didn't mention a word about food sanitation. Last year, our guide had solemnly told us at the beginning of the trip "You WILL get sick on this tour". And she was right - everyone did. And this year's guide was right too - no one got sick.

Kerala, the first state we visited, turns out is one of the more prosperous Indian states, with social programs in place, enviable literacy rates and a well-educated population. Ironically, it is the state that has had a Communist government for the longest. It is also strongly Christian - primarily Syrian Christian (brought to India in the first century AD), and Catholic (brought later by the Portuguese). It was odd to see churches sitting cheek by jowl with Hindu temples and Islamic mosques. But everyone seemed to get along just fine.

Our Traveling Companions

We met up with the nine other people who would be touring with us - quite a diverse lot. There was a couple from New Zealand, a couple from Vancouver, Canada, and solo travelers from Canada, Australia (two), Holland, and England. Our tour leader (photo left) was Nitin, an unfailing cheerful twenty-something from Himchal Pradesh state in northern India (Himalayan region). Unlike our other tours with Intrepid, most of our traveling companions weren't used to traveling downscale in developing countries and/or weren't particularly adventure-some in food and other local cultural interactions. This put a bit of a damper on things, but we still had a great time.



Photo at right : from left to right, our traveling companions: Viviana (Canada), Mariele (Holland), Sue (New Zealand), John (NZ), Jane (UK), Libby (Canada). **Missing**: Scott & Kathy; [Blake](#) (Canada), [John](#) (Australia) & [James](#) (Australia)