

India Journal 2002

Kerala, Southern India



Unedited Version



Tuesday 19th March 2002

“The surf is either big or we’re flying really low”, I announced to Phil on peering through the airplane window on approach to Trivandrum. On landing we were crowded into small buses to be driven no more than 50 meters to the airport terminal where the passport queues were already well formed. Standing in queue I noted that it really did look more like a bus station than an airport – although it did have air-conditioning (well, 4 fans attached to each column in the middle of the large hall that is!). On reaching the front of the queue we handed over our passports to a man – who then handed them over to someone else who in turn handed them to another man who checked them before handing them back to the ‘middle man’ who handed them back to us. We then walked about 1 meter before having them checked again. We truly were in India I felt after all that!

Now on to get our bags and here ensued a bizarre form of the ‘Generation Game’ whereby box after box after box paraded along the conveyer belt leaving us wondering how they fitted it all on the plane. So I stood waiting for the luggage with Phil guarding our precious hand luggage, amongst a sea of moustached Indian businessmen (I had been one of a few women on the flight from Bahrain). Eventually something other than boxes appeared but then a further consignment of boxes followed. On occasions I helped one of the men pull on of the huge boxes off the belt and had to remind myself that a thank you wasn’t always granted. It is a country where even small boys will push you aside to get on a bus and rickshaws will happily run you down but you can always be guaranteed a ‘good morning’ by a passer-by, even if it is 6 o’clock in the evening.

Eventually normal luggage appeared and ours arrived safely amongst it. We then made our way to the money exchange, which in this case was Thomas Cook. Continuing to maintain my dominance in the peculiar art of Indian ‘queuing’ systems, I skilfully elbowed a man out of the way who was trying to jump in. I then proceeded to demand small notes from the money exchange and surprisingly received them. It’s a funny thing but you feel a little bad about being bossy/domineering, almost afraid of being labelled typically British ‘Empirish’ but it really is do that or be stamped on.

But now it was Phil’s turn to stride forth as he led me through the hustle and bustle outside the terminal, sweeping past a swarm of taxi drivers demanding our custom. We went over to a group of rickshaw drivers and then Phil proceeded to negotiate our price to Kovalam, whilst very patiently yet forcefully preventing his luggage from being wrestled from him and loaded into a rickshaw. Not until a good price was struck did we embark – wondering whether the ‘good price’ was relevant to the speed and road-worthiness of the chosen rickshaw (and driver!). Phil was particularly concerned at the dodgy gear-changing used by said driver and wondered whether not only were we going to make it up the hills but indeed whether this man had ever driven a rickshaw before.

Finally we arrived in Kovalam and were dropped at the top of the hill. We were offered a different rickshaw down the hill and on refusing, we were offered to carry our luggage down. We refused this also and started walking. Shortly after our rickshaw driver drove past us down the hill with the second driver as a passenger. They waved and smiled and we waved back but wondered why our lift didn’t extend to down the hill after all. Maybe we had haggled too much!

We arrived at the guesthouse that Phil had stayed at a few years ago with a previous girlfriend. We were greeted by Hari who said he had received Phil’s letter notifying him of our arrival. Hari gave me a strange look until Phil told him that I wasn’t Debbie (his previous girlfriend), I was a ‘different woman’. Hari smiled and said “oh, another one” and I pulled Phil’s leg about the many different women that he must have brought here. Hari showed us to our room and upon Phil asking the price, he said we should rest and then we would sort it out. Thankfully Phil trusts Hari and had previously stayed with him for three months, so we left it like this and settled in.

It was still only 10am and after a bit of unpacking and a cool shower, we had a lie down. After all we hadn’t slept for a good many hours. We awoke at about 2pm and decided to have a look around. Strolling down to and along the beach enabled me to get orientated and Phil to remember old haunts and greet old friends. He was surprised how many locals remembered him after four years but he is a tall, blond surfer with a friendly manner who was here for 3 months so I would say it was quite easy to remember him really. One of the people we met who recognized him was a very petite fruit seller (one of the many women who sell fruit along the beach). She said it had been a bad season for selling. I noted she had the most beautifully white teeth and wonderful smile. Later on we met another fruit seller who recognized Phil. Although a very pleasant lady, her smile wasn’t as pleasing and I wondered whether it was an indication of the healthiness of her fruit or not. Phil told me it was because she was chewing Paan, a stimulating blend of leaves, nuts and spices, which makes it look like you are chewing blood. I was also concerned over Phil’s unfaithfulness to a particular fruit seller and hoped that this didn’t lead to a ‘cat fight’ in a few days time.



After our initial stroll around we made for Lonely Planet Vegetarian Restaurant where I was to experience my first proper Indian Masala Dosa and Phil was to rekindle his love of them. Two Masala Dosas later (at a very acceptable price of RS70 – just over £1) and after having a puppy at the restaurant chew my feet, sandals, T-shirt and bum bag in turn, we headed off back to the beach for another stroll. Phil had had to remind me at the restaurant that we weren't in the UK now and stroking dogs and eating food weren't always conducive.

On the beach there are a few dogs kicking around. Most of them are 'scruff-bag hang-outs' who, although like the beach sellers are just scraping a living off

the tourists and scraps, seem to enjoy their lazy existences. Most of them sit around in the sun or under a tourist's beach chair and occasionally go and sit down in the sea to cool off before chasing off the next dog a few meters along who has strayed into their patch. I even saw a family with a plump fluffy white dog on a lead today. I wondered what the beach dogs thought of that.

We strolled along the beach as the sun started to sink, and then headed over the headland and onto the next beach along to the north. We sat for a while watching the sun go down into the sea and the rooks fly to roost before heading back to our room. At an early 7.30pm, we went to bed.



Wednesday 20th March 2002

We slept like a baby until the early hours. Well, we thought it was about 4 or 5am but it was only 2am. Phil had woken up earlier too and had thought it must have been time to get up but it was only 10.30pm, a mere 3 hours after we had gone to bed. We talked to a while and I told Phil that I had been having dreams, mostly about being back in the UK and then I would suddenly wake up and wonder where I was. I did have one dream which was about being over here. In it, Phil had told me we had to go out to eat at the restaurant now because after 6pm the owner's license to be polite ran out and they became rude! He thought it might have been a reflection of the unintentional lack of politeness at times that is demonstrated by Indians.

We eventually got back to sleep but our time clocks must have been well out as we awoke at 2pm. So much for getting up at 6.30am to check the surf! We went for a stroll and then had juice at the German Bakery while watching the surf, the world go by and catching the cool breeze from the rooftop restaurant. After we strolled via a postcard shop, into the back lanes a little and past one of the brightly coloured temples. We also passed a shop selling antiques called 'Useless Wali'.

Then it was back onto the beach where we finally found a spot that was calm enough for me to brave having a dip. The water was lovely and cool and we stayed in for some time before heading back to our room. We had a quick shower and changed into yoga stuff and did about 40-50 minutes of yoga on Hari's rooftop. A few locals gave us a glance and a little boy danced awhile to the loud music that was playing from the temple next door. Phil sweated a lot and I moaned a little about not being as flexible as I should have been in the heat, before Phil pointed out that I really hadn't been practicing that much recently. Point taken.

After we showered once more before changing into our evening clothes and 'hitting the town' – well finding a nice restaurant to eat at anyway. The food was good, the company (Phil) was lovely, the sea and the moonlight provided the entertainment and the cool breeze provided the air conditioning. I started to write this journal for the first time and finished it up to this point when lying on the bed back in our room under the fan.

Thursday 21st March 2002

Once more we awoke in the early hours expecting it to almost be the morning. I had had another bizarre dreams but this time based in the UK. My mum was sat on the toilet when we got back from India and the first thing I asked her was whether hunting had been banned. She said it had and we all started to cry with joy. I had a real problem sleeping for the rest of the night after that and we vowed to try and get up at 6.30am to try and right our body clocks.

At 6.30am the alarm went off and I awoke moaning from the only sleep I'd had all night. Phil sprung out of bed ready to check the surf and I told him to wake me when he got back from surfing. Ironically I then couldn't sleep and Phil

returned having failed to find decent surf. He got back into bed and we reset the alarm for 9.30am but when it went off I awoke feeling even sleepier and Phil hadn't slept at all. Regardless we got up and showered, inspecting our first mosquito bites of the trip, before venturing out for breakfast. We stopped at Fast Eddy's restaurant just up the road on the corner and I had tomato dosa with a scrummy amount of garlic and Phil had masala dosa. It was good but not particularly fast so I'm not sure what the 'fast' in Fast Eddy's refers to. We whiled the time away watching the crazy Indian world go by – happy beggars staring the tourists out, a truck full of water tanks stalling halfway up the hill and spilling its contents and the chai walla across the way going about his business.

After we walked a while along the beach, having to divert slightly because of the incoming fishing boats and the ensuing scrabble to view and buy the catch. We then hung out on the beach for a far while, occasionally going for a cooling dip in the sea. Phil went in at one point and body surfed a wave in only to have the 'foaming monster' whip his shorts down to his knees. Unluckily I hadn't witnessed this, which to Phil's relief, probably meant that nobody else had either. I spent most of my time in the water on my knees and, because the pull of the water is so strong, I came out with slightly sore knees from being dragged back and forth. I also realized that I had spent too much time with the sea washing my sun block off and Phil had only put a bit on – so we later returned to our room all the more pinker than perhaps we should have been.



We showered once more and changed into slightly more protective clothing before going in search of a thali meal. We sat for some time eating, drinking and watching the world go by on the beach and writing postcards. We were sat next to a quite arrogant man (German we think) who had shown an interest in buying wooden carved elephants from a beach seller. He really was being very rude to the seller and you could almost see the frustration on the sellers face. I'm sure if he weren't so desperate to make a sale to make a living he would have slapped him one. I would have done. After food we went in search of stamps to post our postcards but were told that they were all gone and the nearest place we could buy them was 15km away. We decided to leave stamps for now and stick to walking a short distance through the leafy paths to take a bit of super 8 and photos for the first time in the trip and also to search out any good yoga classes. We found three in total but the second was the most promising and the teacher seemed genuine. It was Rs 200 for 1.5 hours each and the classes started at 8am. We decided to think about it and came back to our room before going onto the roof for our own yoga session. A little boy in an adjacent house started to mimic our postures and we were constantly accompanied by the loud music from the temple next door.

After we sat in the garden chilling out until the mosquitoes got the better of us and we retreated indoors for a shower and a lie down. Both of us ended up drifting off to sleep but managed to wake up eventually to go in search of food and entertainment. We went to Hawah beach restaurant watching part of a pirated film on DVD while stuffing ourselves silly with pakora, chips, vegetable chapatti and biriyani. We didn't have a clue what was going on in the film and that is no reflection on the film or the fact that we had come into it part way through. It was more to do with its presentation; the sound was either too loud or too quiet, you could hear the audience laughing, sneezing, coughing etc (the film was obviously filmed off a live cinema screen with the audience in the foreground), the person who had filmed it coughed or accidentally hit the microphone every now and again and the film generally jumped or completely stopped every so often. Thankfully the other two people watching it found it equally as amusing. Whether it was the film or the food or both, despite the lack of alcohol, we felt vaguely drunk as we walked back down the beach after! The distant horizon was lit by a string of lights from the fishing boats and the lighthouse offered further sweeping illumination up on the headland. With bulging tummies we went home to shower, read and bed down for the night.

Friday 22nd March 2002

The alarm went at 6.30am and the first indication I had that Phil wasn't going to get up was having his watch shoved in my face. He then rolled over and went back to sleep, as did I. This was the first night we had not woken up in the wee hours and yet, somehow, we needed even more sleep. We finally got up at around midday and promptly retired to the veranda to read and play chess (I won 2-1 for a change!). Just after we got up I went to get water from the fridge and the bottom tray collapsed and broke. Before we went out, we were anxious to tell Hari about it but when we did he thankfully said it was already broken and "don't worry, this is your home", which was sweet. We went for breakfast (well, okay it was lunch by then) via the stamp shop but yet again he had no stamps but promised after 9.30am tomorrow he would have some. We had food at Red Star (where we had thali yesterday), overlooking the beach. The thali was excellent and again we took our time watching the goings on on the beach. Today was the first time that I had really relaxed properly and not been worried about doing absolutely nothing. Earlier, while playing chess, I had had a strange but pleasant feeling of really feeling at home.

We returned to Hari's and again spent some time in the garden. Hari's garden is full of the most beautiful plants – many of which we would consider as houseplants in the UK. Then there are the papaya and mango trees and several coconut palms.



After a while we decided to go and do some yoga on the roof. As I was getting changed a little gecko fell from either my top or my hair onto my feet. It made me jump somewhat but they don't worry me at all. I kind of like having them around as they help keep other insects at bay and aren't as scary as spiders. I have seen only one spider so far (touch wood) and that was outside on a web down one of the walkways that we now call 'spider alley'. It is there every time we walk past now.

We only did a fairly short yoga session as I was very stiff and our sunburn also caused a little discomfort. The loud music from the temple next door was again in evidence but wasn't too distracting. It added to the atmosphere really. However, the sudden going off of fireworks near by startled us and we



were keeping a wary eye on the overhead palm fronds as we had already seen a couple crash down heavily to the ground – all in all not terrible conducive to a relaxing session really!

After we headed to the beach for a sunset swim. The sun was sufficiently low as to not be more damaging to our skin and the cooling water was very kind to our sun burnt shoulders. Returning to our room we changed for the evening and headed off to a hotel that was showing 'Lord of the Rings'. Again, it was being shown on a TV screen and the sound was a little to be desired but nevertheless it was better quality than the previous evening and entertaining enough. The food was really nice, particularly the cardamom tea and the coconut rice pudding (which I was hoping would aid my slightly ailing toilet antics a little!).

After we went for a short stroll on the beach before returning to Hari's for yet another cold shower. It has become common practice to have several showers a day – not so much as a cleanliness thing but just because it is so pleasing in the heat. Try to get me under even a warmish shower at home and I would moan but here, it is any excuse and I'm under the cold water.

We met up with the little gecko again just before retiring to bed to read. Caught up on today's journal as well. Tomorrow we really are going to try to get early for either surfing or the morning yoga class.

Saturday 23rd March 2002



Wow, we actually made it and got up at 6.30am, despite a bit of a dodgy nights sleep. We both had funny dreams but can't remember them, so even when we did sleep it was quite hectic. I also heard another palm frond crash down in the middle of the night. Hari says it's because of all the dry weather – no rain for a long time. Phil went to check the surf, negotiating the palm frond on the way, but returned disappointed so we go ready and went to the yoga class instead. We were a bit dubious at first as there were 9 of us crammed altogether in a tiny room and there was a bit of funny breathing and 'oomm..ing' business going on, but we felt a little happier after some sun salutations. The physical work was interspersed between relaxing in the corpse pose and, had I been doing this class in less hot climes, I would have found a little boring and unchallenging. However, I warmed (literally!) to the class and to the teacher and was quite surprised how relaxing the last part of the relaxation was. We were both happy to consider going again tomorrow morning and we were even happier to be told that from now on it would be Rs 150 instead of Rs 200.

After we went in search of stamps yet again and at last were able to buy them and post off our postcards. This was followed with breakfast at Red Star. I also enquired about a taxi to Varkala and Cape Comorin and was told by taxi driver no 9161 that he would charge Rs 600 and Rs 1100 respectively, which bettered the Rs 800 and Rs 1300 from the man that we had bought the stamps from.

Buying a couple of red bananas on the way back to Hari's we then retired on the veranda to write postcards, read and catch up on journal. I also formed the idea for the first time of writing an article for the Big Issue magazine about the fruit-selling ladies on the beach. We had come back from Sri Lanka with an article for the Vegan magazine but I really wanted to better that during our stay in India and come back with at least two ideas for articles – maybe even more.

We had a nice long chat with Hari and showed him our postcards that we had brought from Devon and Cornwall. He looked long and hard at the ones with sheep in them and asked what they were. We told him they were sheep and he didn't understand until Phil said 'mutton' and Hari looked shocked. He said "but they are as big as our cows!" Hari also solved the mystery of the noisy creature that has been hidden in the trees. So many times we have tried to look to see what it was but couldn't. He told us it was a bird – one sex was brown and the other blue and white. Maybe one day we will see it.

Hari brought us out some tea and then went off for an afternoon siesta. We sipped away on the delicious tea while listening to the now familiar loud tunes coming from the temple next door. We really are beginning to know the songs now, as they are the same ones every evening (including one that sounds like a spaghetti western tune, Indian style). With the continued backdrop of the temple music, we strolled off towards the beach for a sunset swim. On the way there we noticed that the spider down 'spider alley' had gone and its web was broken and it made me feel a little sad, as I had become used to seeing it every time we walked past.

The sea was still really quite warm but the cool breeze did much to cool us down. After a while we went to get changed and go out for the evening. It was back to Hawah Beach restaurant for dinner and to watch a movie. Just before the film started we sat overlooking the beach as we had felt raindrops and anticipated a storm but it didn't develop. The film, again, had technical hitches but was entertaining enough as an accompaniment to dinner. After we walked on the beach and then sat for a while talking. I told Phil that I had been surprised how relaxing the end relaxation session in yoga had been today. I said it was the first time I had felt really focused at such a session and started to understand more about the meditative side of things. Even though fearful of sounding 'too cosmic', this was the first time that anything had made any sense to me in regards to mediation, even though I had read a reasonable amount of material about it and it was really quite an exciting moment. Phil explained more about this aspect of yoga to me while we sat under the stars and listened to the waves washing up the beach.

On arriving back at Hari's, I had less of a relaxing experience as my 'touch wood' wish of not seeing a spider had obviously not worked. There was a bloody great big spider on the outside (thankfully) of the mossy net. This was the first time that I had known Phil to not want to touch a spider (he said he didn't know if it might have been venomous or not!) and that made it all the more scary. However, he wrestled it into a glass just as Hari came along to see what was going on. Phil went to put it outside but upon coming back in, Hari pointed out that the spider was still there, but now on the outside of the glass! Hari took the glass from Phil and flicked it off outside. Hari chuckled, Phil chuckled and I merely twitched while thinking about the fact that Phil nearly brought it back into the room! It made for a slightly restless night!



Sunday 24th March 2002

We managed to get up at 6.30am but we were distinctly weary. Phil went to check the surf; it was big but not breaking clean so we decided to go to the yoga class again (although my slightly upset tummy protested this decision a little). Again the class was fairly well laid back and this time there were only 3 of us so it was a little cooler, despite the electric fan stopping at one point. On the way back we met Leela, one of the fruit sellers on the beach and promised we would return later for some fruit. I also asked her whether I could speak with her about her work and take photos for my article and she was fine with this.

We showered and then ended up lying down for a nap/rest. Phil also spent some time writing down what we had done in our yoga class. When we got up, we spent some time reading and writing outside in the garden and I also put some washing on the line after removing the fallen palm frond that was hanging from it. It was surprisingly heavy and I could now quite understand what Hari had been on about when he said that sometimes they kill people when they fall.

A while later we went back to see Leela. She seemed surprised that we had returned as it had been a few hours since but I explained that we had fallen asleep. I asked her my questions and took photos while we sat through eating a mountain of fruit that she prepared. Before we knew it another coconut was being opened, and then a mango and then a pineapple to go (just because I had mentioned that it was a really huge pineapple!). Still I got answers to my questions and some lovely photos and she did have a lovely smile despite ripping us off slightly! The fruit had been a very healthy option too.

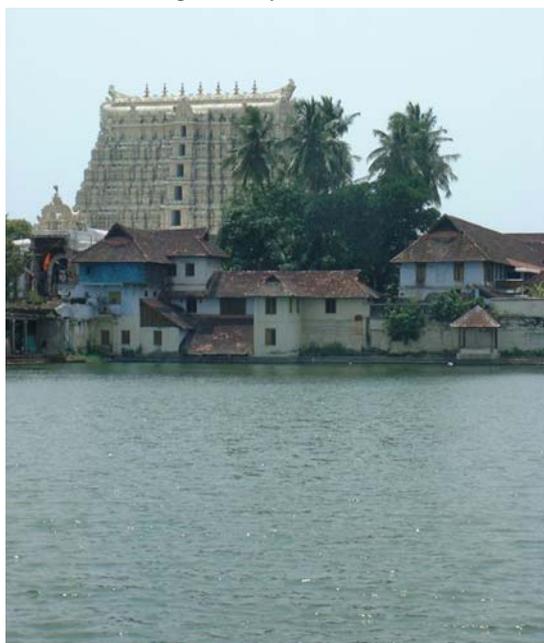
While we were with Leela, Phil noticed that the surf had greatly improved – well better than it had been yet – so we returned the excess fruit to Hari's fridge and went to check the surf on Lighthouse Beach. On the way, Lily, another fruit selling lady, cornered me and because I'm a soft touch, I ended up buying two bottles of coconut oil. Although I intended to buy some anyway from the fruit sellers, rather than a shop, the price was quite high. Still it will help me



tomorrow when I return with rather less fruit in my belly, to talk to Lily for the article. The surf was good on the beach near the lighthouse so we once more we returned to Hari's for Phil to get his board and gear. On the way, and to my absolute delight, some children by the temple asked for school pens and with glee I said yes and pulled out several from my bum bag. I had brought 50 with me in anticipation of this happening but this was the first time I had been asked. I didn't quite have enough on me so I promised I would get some more from my room. A few minutes later when we went back past, some of the children were still waiting and I handed them out.



When we got to the beach I sat under the shade of a palm and Phil took to the surf. I caught up on my journal but had the constant bombardment of fruit sellers, sarong and beach mat sellers. I constantly explained that I was too full and that we were travelling here for one month so couldn't buy yet as our bags would be too heavy. I was constantly replied with "Later?" or "Very cheap price?" and "Lovely jubbly" (a favourite saying at present amongst the sellers for some reason!). Gradually the traffic calmed. After a while I went to buy more postcards before returning to the beach to watch Phil surf and the world go by. I noted that most of the dogs on the beach tend to adopt various tourists to either share the shade of their sun beds or umbrellas or generally follow them around. Some are welcome and some are not. One woman had a dog following her who seemed welcome. It guarded her and her belongings while she went for a swim to the extent that it barked at any person or other dog that approached. When she left, it went with her and then sat at her feet guarding her while she ate fruit. There is something quite nice about this temporary relationship but it must also be so difficult upon separation.



Phil came out of the sea earlier than anticipated as it was closing out quite a lot and he was only getting short rides. As we walked back to Hari's we noticed that 'Spider Alley' had its namesake back again with a newly renovated web.

We showered and chilled out for a while, eating some of Leela's pineapple and coconut straight from the fridge. Then we put our evening clothes on and walked along and sat on the beach for a while. There seemed to be a very high tide as the waves were going nearly all the way up the beach. We had to make a dash for it at one point as a wave took us by surprise. I ran but Phil was left clinging to the end of one of the beaches' fishing boats while the wave passed. We then went to the Rainbow Hotel restaurant for food, which was a bit posher than usual. We couldn't resist one more cooling sit along the front before returning to our room to read, relax and then sleep. The

mosquitoes had really chomped on my feet so a restful night wasn't guaranteed, as they were really itchy.

Monday 25th March 2002

We got up at 7.30am. Although the alarm went at 6.30am, Phil didn't want to check the surf. We had been surprised at how much we had managed to sleep, as it had really been very hot. We saw Hari, who came to sweep our room, and he agreed that it had been particularly hot. Hari swept our room with basically a bunch of twigs but it was very effective and quick. This morning there had been more than just sand and dust on the floor as, when Phil had originally got out of bed, there had been another big spider on the floor. Luckily (but not for the spider) it was dead and luckily Phil had got out of bed before me and been able to remove it before I caught sight of it!

We hurried along to our 8am yoga class. As ever it was good but I found the relaxation less easy today, as my mossy bites were distractingly itchy. We then went back to our room, showered and went to post more postcards. We also enquired about flights to Sri Lanka. Unfortunately they had risen a lot since Phil was here last and it was about £100 each and that wouldn't include the money we would have to then spend on taxi fares to and from Hikkaduwa. We would have to see how much money we had left nearer to the end of our stay.

We ran into Lily, from whom I had bought the coconut oil. We sat and chatted while we ate and drank coconut. I also took her photo for the article before we wandered along to the further end of the beach as we had promised Elizabeth

that we would buy from her today (she had cornered us coming out of yoga this morning). Just before we got to her, Sally, another fruit seller, cornered us out of sight of Elizabeth and tried to sell us her fruit. We declined saying that we had to keep our word to Elizabeth and that we would another day. So we sat and had mango with Elizabeth and again I took photos. There was no sign of Leela today but nobody knew why. After, we went back to our room and got our stuff ready for our trip to Trivandrum. Changing some money on the way, we walked to the bus station. Part way along the back of the beach, a group of men approached and one of them asked, "take photo?" I wondered why Phil was so abrupt at saying no as I thought they were asking us to take a photo for them but Phil explained that quite often men like taking photos of western women for other less innocent purposes. How naive am I?! I would have been funny however if I had said yes and then gone to take the camera from him.

Having experienced bus journeys in Sri Lanka, I really imagined the journey to Trivandrum to be a hot, crushed affair but I was very wrong. We easily got seats and at Rs7 each (about 10p), the cool, windowless ride on the bus was well worth it. I took super8 footage on the way too. On reaching the bus depot, we were splurged out into a noisy, dusty and hot world where beggars stopped you every few feet (or so it seemed) and horns blasted constantly.

We visited the temple but couldn't go in, as it was Hindus only. One of the men at the temple took it upon himself to tell us about the temple and showed us around the outside. Being that he was a religious man, we thought that this was a genuine transaction of knowledge and love of his temple. When he asked for a donation to the temple we thought fair enough but were obviously being naive as he then asked for money for himself too. We refused as we

said we thought he was the temple and that we had already given a generous donation anyway.

We went back past the old palace, which is now a museum, and its amazing architecture, and then we rejoined the furore that was the main street (Mahatma Gandhi Road), which runs 3 – 4 km north to south. In most places there isn't a specific pavement space to walk on so you are left to run the gauntlet of the busy, noisy traffic rushing closely past. Likewise when crossing the road, it really is quite a feat. We found the best approach was to cross at the same time as old men or children as the drivers seemed a little more sympathetic of them.

We found a few bookshops to peruse and

the best thing was that they were air-conditioned. Only problem was then having to face the heat back outside. I bought an Indian joke book that tickled my fancy, not so much because the jokes were funny but more because they weren't. Besides it was only Rs50 and would make a funny present for a friend.

We found a little vegetarian eating-place that was very basic but cheap and the food (vadu, iddlys), although rather spicy, was good. Phil spotted something sweet looking and asked if it had dairy in it and it didn't. So we gorged ourselves on that too (it was like a sweet idly and was called something like Kesai).

Moving further down the road we happened upon an Ayurvedic pharmacy that advertised spirulina so we investigated and found 100 tablets of spirulina for RS 175, which is not only a bargain but also hopefully an aid for dodgy tummy. We also visited the supermarket and I think offered some of the workers entertainment for the afternoon. Firstly we oohed and aahed around the fruit and vegetable section, much to the amusement of the man selling them, touching and smelling some of the strange items that we had never encountered before. Then we proceeded to buy 20 bars of Chandrika soap ("to ensure our personal charm" – or so it says on the packet). At a bargain Rs9.50 (about 12p) each we couldn't resist stocking up on this wonderful soap that normally costs £1 each in the UK. With each 2 bars we bought, we benefited from the offer of 1 spoon, suitably embellished with the name of the soap. In total we ended up with 10 spoons and left the till staff with smiles on their faces. Ladened down with bags of soap we decided to turn back down south on Mahatma Gandhi Road but visited the British Library on the way to see if we could peek at a British paper and find out what the news was on banning hunting in the UK. Unfortunately it was closed on Mondays (as clearly written in Lonely Planet if I had bothered to look!).

The buses back to Kovalam are always extremely packed and thankfully Phil knew this so, having had enough of an experience in the city, we decided to take the easy option and get a rickshaw back. We negotiated the good price of Rs 100 and again enjoyed the cooling breeze of movement. We passed the bus station on the way, and witnessing the crammed buses, we realized our decision had been wise. Again I took the opportunity of shooting Super 8 footage along the way.



On arriving back in Kovalam we went to check the surf quickly on the northern beach but it was no good. We returned to our room, took a lovely cool shower and then ended up nodding off for a while. Rising just before 8.30pm we made for the Hawah Beach restaurant to see what the 8.30pm film was but the Lord of the Rings was the only film tonight and that had started at 7pm. We walked further along the front and decided to take one of the outside tables at Velvet Dawn restaurant to eat. The food was good but my tummy troubles suddenly reared its squitty head and after two rushed trips to the toilet, I had decided I had had enough food and that dungarees weren't the best choice for clothing for the evening. Phil ended up eating more food than he should have as a result of me leaving mine. We returned to our room to read a little before turning in for probably our latest night so far.

Tuesday 26th March 2002

Got up at 7.30am and got ready for yoga. My tummy was so far okay, much to my relief. The yoga was good and there were still only 3 of us. However, the relaxation was still not as easy as it had previously been. It could have been something to do with the loud argument between a man and a woman in Malayalam just outside the window. After we returned to our room, skilfully avoiding any promised fruit ladies. After a shower, some washing and giving Phil an ankle massage, I then proceeded to break a whole bottle of coconut oil all over the floor. Phil went to check the surf and I decided to take it easy and catch up on my journal while sitting on the veranda. Before Phil returned Hari came to chat and stayed for a while. Phil returned and told us that the fruit-selling ladies practically mobbed him. We continued to chat to Hari and he offered to organize a rickshaw for us at a good price for our move to Varkala tomorrow. We sat for a while longer after Hari went and then went to the German Bakery for lunch. We had some lovely Kashmiri tea with lunch, which I'm sure we will return for at some point. Kashmiri tea is green tea with a blend of saffron, cardamom and cinnamon infused in it. I will try and make it myself on our return to the UK.

We then decided to the beach – Phil to have a quick surf and I decided to hire a boogie board (much to Phil's surprise) for Rs50. The couple who hire the boards recognized Phil from his previous trip but looked a bit confused by me. I said "different woman" and the woman, Leela, laughed so much that it was amusing in itself! The first wave I took basically took me under which, as a bit scary, but to my surprise and to Phil's amazement, I was up for more. After a while Phil felt okay about leaving me and going a bit further out for a surf. A couple more waves had a go at me but generally I quite enjoyed it – a first for me. Having nasal drain after was also a first for me!

While we were in the sea the heavens opened. It was really strange being in the sea in such warm rain but exciting too. The sun went an amazing orange before it got covered over and strangely the sand on the beach went black when it was raining but felt gorgeous and soft underfoot. Kindly Leela had removed my clothes from the beach to keep dry, although all our clothes got saturated anyway on the walk back to Hari's! Everyone seemed happy and excited about the rain – especially Hari for his garden plants – as it was long overdue. The streets were flooded and some were running rivers. Kindly Hari's wife had taken our washing in for us – although Phil's yoga mat, which had been drying on the roof, got soaked. We dried off back at the room and read for a while before going out to the Hawah Beach for food and to watch the movie. Hari caught us just before we left to say that he was unable to get his friend to drive us in his rickshaw to Varkalla tomorrow.

After the film, we headed back home for our second late night in a row. There was still lightning in the distance but no sign of either rain or thunder as we turned in for the night.

Wednesday 27th March 2002

The rain had brought us the joy of a cooler night's sleep but we still wanted more when the alarm went off. However, we managed to get up for our 8am yoga class. It was a very hot one and a half hour though as there was a power cut and so we had no fan to cool us. We told our teacher that we were not going to be there for a few days due to our trip to Varkala but that we would return. We found out more about him too – he was actually lives in Geneva but is on an extended holiday in Kovalam.

On the way back from yoga we met Hari by the temple and chatted for a few minutes during which time a spider dropped onto me from a palm above. Surprisingly I didn't scream and shout but froze while Phil went about getting it off. Twice in two days I had faced two fears (water and spiders) and acted surprisingly well.

After a shower back at the room we packed our bags and then went off for gorgeous peanut butter on toast and Kashmiri tea at the German Bakery, again skilfully avoiding the hard sell of the fruit ladies. Then it was a quick change of money and off to find our rickshaw driver with whom we had struck a good deal earlier for our one and a half hour journey to Varkala (Rs 400). We found him easily and went about strapping the surfboard to the top of the rickshaw. I was a little concerned though because just before we set off our driver took a big gulp of what appeared to be rum. Added to this, less than ¼ mile out of Kovalam we stalled and he switched to his 'reserve' tank of petrol. He did however assure us he had enough but whether this referred to petrol or rum we weren't sure!



The journey to Varkala was interesting and again I took lots of Super 8 footage. It did seem to take a long time though but we did eventually arrive safely and then started our search for a suitable room. We looked at so many rooms that I'm sure we could rewrite Varkala's accommodation section in the Lonely Planet. We even stopped half way through



searching for a tea break but in the end we returned to the second room we had looked at. This was in Jicky's, a guesthouse set back about 100m from the cliff amongst the palms and which was part of the Oottupura Vegetarian restaurant. We were happy with the rooms security, feel, temperature, mossy net potential, price, 'breezability factor', bathroom, mattress and most importantly the length of the bed so that Phil could at least fit in it! We realized how fussy we were! However, most of the other rooms seemed to have beds that left Phil's feet hanging over the edge.

After a fair amount of faffing about with unpacking and deliberating over the positioning of the mossy net, we had a cold shower and then headed off for a walk and some food. We ended up at Oottupura vegetarian restaurant itself and had lovely curry (with lots of spinach to boost our ailing digestion). It started raining while we ate and then the power went and we could see lightning on the horizon of the sea. The power eventually returned and the storm ceased to develop. We finished our evening off with a shared banana fritter before retiring to our room for the night.

Thursday 28th March 2002

The storm returned in the night and it poured down. We had the windows wide open and the breeze that accompanied the storm did much to provide us with a cool nights sleep. Fireworks were going off at possibly 4am though but we managed to ignore these reasonably. The alarm went off at 6.30am but we ignored it and slept until 10am. Just before we woke up I was having a bizarre dream about football and when I awoke bizarrely there was a bird outside singing almost exactly the tune to the chant "Come on you England"!

We went to check the surf and Phil decided to go in so we got our stuff and made for the beach. I stayed in the shelter of a palm and read but Phil wasn't out for very long as it turned out not to be great. On the way back from surfing a little boy stopped to ask Phil whether he had a motor in his room. We didn't understand at first but then realized he meant a motor for the surfboard!

After we went for breakfast at Oottupura that was basically lunch by this time. We had lovely string noodle cake things (bit like string hoppas in Sri Lanka) called Idiyappam and also coconut oothappam (which are like pancakes), each with lovely curry and coconut chutney. Phil then decided he was still hungry (some how!) and ordered a paper roast that is like a huge rolled up thin pancake, which extended beyond the sides of the plate.

We waddled back to our room after as we had asked someone to



look at the toilet (which wouldn't flush) and the fan (which was noisy). The man didn't fix the toilet (but said he would return to do it) and managed to put oil all over the fan, which then spread, evenly in drops all round the room when he switched it back on. It was slightly quieter though!

We went searching for yoga classes later. We had spoken to an English couple who were also staying at Jickys Rooms, and asked whether they knew of the best one. They didn't but had seen a lot of people going to the Progressive Centre. They said that the Yoga Ashram near to our rooms was only really meditation, but recommended it for that in itself as the man was a genuine, religious man who let people decide for themselves if they wanted to give money or not for sessions.

We looked at two yoga classes; the one at the Progressive Yoga School which had an 8.30am class and the one next door, which did a class at 7.30am with Kathakali style (a form of yoga used for exercises for the famous Kathakali dancers). We decided to try the 8.30am class tomorrow – or at least give it a go. With that decided we continued along the coast on the cliff for a bit of a walk. We sat and watched the surf for a while and then walked a little further along where we discovered a lovely little beach and decided to go in the sea to cool down. We had only just got out when we saw a potential storm approaching so we scurried back to our room. The storm didn't seem to develop and after only a while of sitting down, we got fidgety and decided to go back into the sea, but this time on the nearest beach. The water was lovely and the air had started to cool down. We really enjoyed the sea as the sun went orange and dropped to the horizon. Just before it completely disappeared we climbed back up the cliff and went for a shower before strolling to the veggie restaurant for dinner and the same delicious food we had had the night before. As usual the power cut out part way through but this just added to the atmosphere.

On returning to our room, Phil spent some time looking for a pair of trousers he had been looking for since yesterday. I caught up on my journal and read while watching him with amusement unpacking his bags and searching for the missing trousers. He swore blind he'd packed them. Then we suddenly realized they were padding out the cushion cover that Phil had brought with him. I think the heat is getting to Phil's head and memory! Maybe he should get a hat. That said my spelling and vocabulary has taken a downward spiral. I'm sure I'm being affected by all the 'Hindish' spelling I see around me. The other day we saw a clothes shop advertising the selling of 'Tits'. God knows what they were – bras perhaps? Some of the spelling you see is very phonetic though and I think that is what is happening to me (you should have seen my journal before I typed it up!).

Friday 29th March 2002

Today, although we didn't get up at 6.30am to check the surf, we did managed to get up for the 8.30am yoga class, although it did feel like we were sleep walking the whole way there. We were the only people at the class, and despite the teacher saying the morning class was the most intense, the pace was very slow. There was a lot of relaxation but it was difficult to relax as the grass mats on the floor were crawling with ants and flies kept landing on us. Some of the poses however were difficult to hold for the length of time required and on one occasion, after coming up from having our heads lowered for some time, both Phil and I felt like we were going to pass out. Every now and again the teacher would come around and push or pull our bodies into positions that you wouldn't thought were entirely possible, although I am still surprised by my lack of my usual flexibility given that I am in a warmer climate and have been doing yoga most days. After we decided that we may return for the afternoon class tomorrow or we may try the 7.30am class at the place next door.

On the way back, instead of returning immediately to our room to shower, we decided to have breakfast straight away and again had our favourite Idiyappam. We sat for some time at breakfast watching the world go by before showering, reading and chatting back at the room. We spent the afternoon lazing around on the beach, soaking up the sun and cooling off in the sea. We did hire an umbrella for Rs50 but didn't make as much use of it as the local pineapple selling lady and an old scruff of a dog that sat chomping its teeth and snorting out green snot. Despite this a



The Kerala Kathakali Centre perform Kichaka Vadha (The Death of Kickaka)



pleasant but very sandy afternoon was spent before returning to de-sand and cool off under the lovely shower and dressing for the evening.

We started our evening by having dinner at Oottupuru (as usual) and then went along for the 6.30pm Kathakali dance performance/demonstration just up the road. This cost Rs 250 for two of us and was on the whole entertaining and informative, if not a little too long and drawn out. These performances often go on for a whole night during festival times though! There was an Australian couple there too, the only other members of the audience. The dancers took us through a demo of all the different eye, facial and body movements before presenting the 'story-play' (which is the meaning of Kathakali). It is performed without words (although the main character was doing rather a lot of grunting and laughing) and accompanied predominantly by drum and cymbal but with some singing too. At the end the Australian guy said "and let that be a lesson to you" but whether he was referring to the moral of the story or going to see the rather long and drawn out performance, we're not sure.

After we went for a cup of tea on the cliff top rather hoping that the distant lightning would entertain us by developing into a full-blown storm but to no avail. We then returned to our room to relax then to bed.

Saturday 30th March 2002

Our sleep was completely disturbed by the noisy fan so decided to switch it off but we then just got disturbed by noisy birds, a dripping tap and the impending heat of the room. The distant thunder and lightning teased us with the hope of cooling rain and breezes but failed to deliver. We'd had enough and decided to change rooms right there and then or at least, go and sleep in another one. We found one empty and enjoyed the coolness and quietness of the fan but it still took a while to get to sleep. When the alarm went at 6.30am we were way too tired to contemplate the 7.30am yoga class so continued to sleep. We finally got up past 9am and returned to our room to shower before going to breakfast.

With bellies full, we got a rickshaw just in time to reach Varkala station for the Kollam train. The train was quite quiet and the journey was 25 minutes of cool breeze and interesting landscape. Then we reached Kollam and were reminded once more about what Indian towns and cities were like. It was dusty, busy and stiflingly hot. I posted my last postcard to mum and dad and then we went searching for the bookshop mentioned in Lonely Planet (Chani's book shop). We found it in the modern shopping centre as stated in the LP but it took all of 30 seconds to look around this incredibly small bookshop! We went into a supermarket within the centre and to our surprise found some Laddoo (Indian sweet balls of rice/semolina, sugar and turmeric), one of our reasons for venturing into the town. We then decided to search out the lakeside and sit down for a cool drink and eat our Laddoo. As it was where the backwater trip leaves from, there were loads of people hassling us to buy stuff but we managed a few minutes of quiet beside the water. The Laddoos turned out to be much sweeter than before so one was enough for now. Then we walked back towards the station via Main Street, which is actually not as busy as the 'main street', but it was still really hot and hectic. We stopped off in an air-conditioned clothes store on the way, more to cool down than to look at the goods, and also for a quick juice on a rooftop leafy veranda away from the 'hub-bub' below. Back to the dusty street and we made for the station. Phil and I are getting really quite good (and confident) at crossing busy roads. At first it seemed an impossible task but it is all in the confidence, timing and most all quickness that you apply that will succeed in not getting you run over!

At the station we found we didn't just have 15 minutes before the train but 1 hour and 15 minutes to wait. We sought shade on the platform, walked a bit and generally watched the world go by. Some children approached us and almost cheekily took the laddoos from Phil. In the end, as they were really a bit too sweet for us anyway, Phil gave them one each. They then asked for a school pen and I was happy to oblige. Off they skipped and shortly after two smaller children, obviously family of the older children, asked for pens. When I handed them over, the smallest one who looked barely four years old, looked like he really didn't now what to do with it but off they skipped regardless.

We finally boarded the train to Varkala and after a short rickshaw ride, were back to the calmness and coolness of the cliffs of Varkala. On returning to our room, we set about moving all our stuff two doors down to our new room with the quiet fan (and a toilet that flushed). We showered and read for a while before taking a short stroll along the cliffs before dinner at Oottupura. After dinner we sat watching the world go by before venturing to our room to rest. We spoke again about the possibility of taking a short trip to Sri Lanka but were still not sure, as it would be more expensive than we originally anticipated. Then we drifted off to sleep.

Sunday 31st March 2002

We failed again to get up at 6.30am. One day maybe we will manage it but this morning we had had such a lovely and cool nights sleep that we just allowed it to continue until about 9.30am. After showering we went to look at the surf from the cliff top. It was big but not peeling properly so we went for breakfast. I broke the Idiyappam with kadala routine by having a masala dosa for a change. We also spoke further about going to Sri Lanka for a few days. We enquired at the money changer/travel agent next door to the restaurant about flights and prices and he confirmed that it was £100 approx each and we wouldn't be able to go until Tuesday. With the travelling it would involve we would

end up spending £150 each for a 4-day trip. We finally, and with disappointment, had to decide against it but vowed that next time we would return to Sri Lanka.

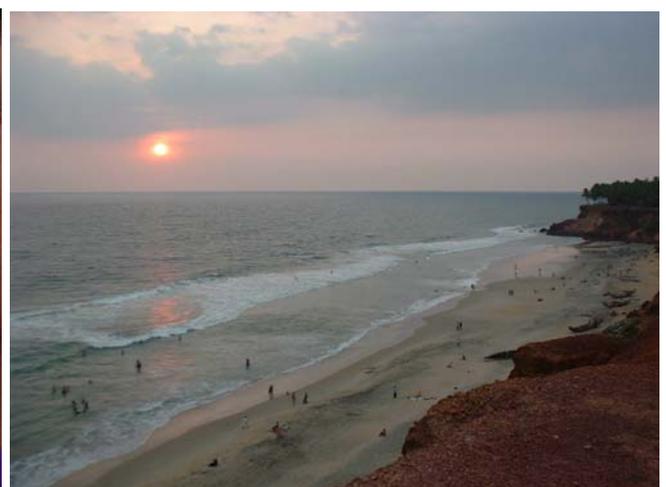
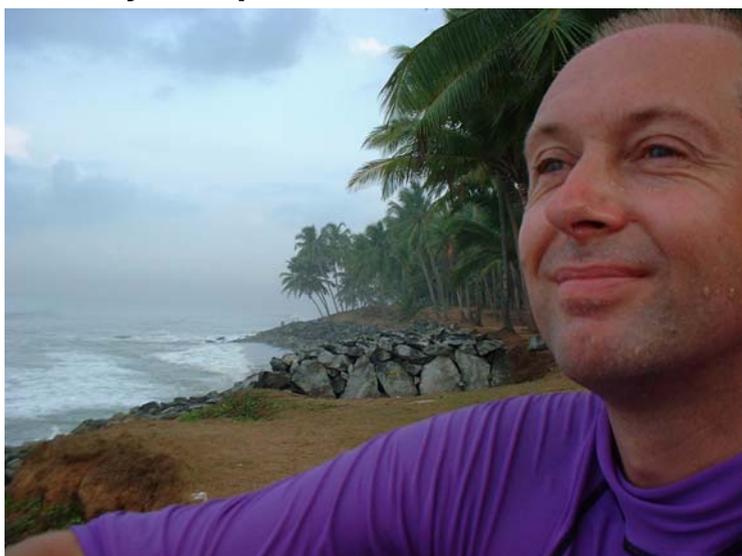
We went for a long walk northwards along the coast to look for surf and to see what was around the corner! We met a 22-year-old fisherman and his 19-year-old friend (who couldn't stop laughing for some reason) and they wanted to know all about us. I picked up a couple of really pretty shells from the beach to take home for mum – she likes to collect rocks and shells from around the world. We also saw two mongooses like creatures scurrying in and around the palms and the rocks. I'm pretty sure they looked like mongoose anyway. There were also lots of cacti (of the *Oppuntia* family) scattered around some of the shoreline areas. I was really surprised to see cacti in India, especially in a tropical type of environment that has monsoon seasons. Some of the locals had used a ring of these cacti, chopped down and bundled together, part way up palm trees, presumably to prevent somebody/something from getting at the coconuts. After going through at least 2 small settlements by the coast and with the sun so high in the sky that our shadows were barely visible beneath us, we turned back to search for a cool drink on the cliffs at Varkala.

After showering (yet again!) we decided to go to the beach again. We hired an umbrella again but the sand, even in the shade, was at first too hot to sit on comfortably. The tide was in quite far and every now and again a big wave would come in and surprise those sunbathing at the back of the beach. The afternoon was spent reading, lying around and taking regular dips in the rough sea. Swimming was out of the question because the rip current was so strong and even standing up was hard enough sometimes). After a while the heat got the better of us and we returned to our room to de-sand and cool off. When we were almost back to the room we saw a heap of palm fronds moving and then saw a dog emerging from the middle of the pile – it was obviously a cool place to be sleeping!

We retraced our steps north in the early evening to catch the setting sun for some yoga posture photographs (hopefully to compliment an article we were thinking of writing). We timed it just right as the sun soon set and got rapidly covered over with cloud. Just before I packed my camera away a crow came and pinched a plastic bag, which contained my lens cap and flew off. I managed to run after it and when it landed a little way off I shouted and persuaded it to drop it. I guess it must have thought that the bag contained food.

We went to Oottupuru for dinner in the evening, which was to be our last as tomorrow we planned to leave to return to Kovalam. Lightning began to flash while we ate, accompanied by a few drops of rain but not enough as to disturb our lovely meal. After eating we went up to the helipad as the lightning was intensifying. About every three seconds the sky and the sea would light up. The storm was coming from inland and looking back that way you could see a palm trees silhouette every time it flashed. The rain and thunder were still not evident at this stage, which made it a bit eerie, especially as a strong wind was now picking up. It was really exciting though. Eventually we started to see forked lightning as the storm grew nearer and we wondered whether out in the open on top of the cliff was a good place to be safety wise! Not very long after we heard the thunder and then the rain started. It was quite refreshing at first but then started to intensify so we headed back to continue to watch it from the shelter of our balcony. Eventually the storm passed moving out to sea and we settled down for the night – as tomorrow we have vowed we would get up at 6.30am.

Monday 1st April 2002



We actually managed to get up at 6.30am, although we were very bleary-eyed at first. We walked along to the north of Varkala to the good surf spot that Phil

had seen yesterday during our walk. At last some good surf for him. Just before he went in a man standing by the shore had indicated to Phil that he should not go in off the rocks but go to the main beach, as it was dangerous. Phil tried to reassure him that it would be okay. As soon as Phil got in the rip took him off to the right for some distance but eventually he managed to get through it and out to the waves, but with a fair amount of effort. A crowd of locals

started to gather and while I filmed Phil catching each wave in turn they guffawed, laughed and cheered behind me. I was approached by two young boys and the older one started up a conversation which went like so;

Boy – “Who is he?” (pointing out towards Phil)

Me – “My husband”.

Boy – “What’s name?” (again pointing towards Phil)

Me – “Phil”.

Boy – “Tell him to come here. Call him back”.

Me – “Why?”.

Boy – “It’s not quiet here”. (Indicating big waves with his hand). “It is somewhat dangerous”.

Me – “He is okay. He’s a good swimmer”.

Boy – “Me Ben”.

Me – “My name is Scooby”.

Boy – “School pen?”

Me – “Err, okay”. (I was wondering whether he thought I’d said school pen instead of Scooby but handed over one pen to him and one to his friend.

The old man sat on the bank behind us says something to them.)

Boy – “He wants one too”. (Pointing to the old man behind).

Me – “He’s too old for school”. (I was laughing when I answered but noticed that only the old man and me seemed to understand my amusement, even though the old man didn’t understand English).

Boy – “It’s for his baby”.



With that I reached into my bum bag and gave the boy one to take up to the old man. They swiftly said goodbye and my attention returned to Phil and the waves. After this my attention was only briefly broken by a mongoose in the rocks (which was visible for too short a time to capture on film) and a man climbing a tree behind me picking coconuts. Phil indicated to me that he was going for one more wave then get out so I made my way towards the beach further up where I knew he was going to come in to. Phil was very happy with his surf, even though on the way back in he nearly got taken into the rocks. He announced that maybe he would write an article for a surf magazine after all. He was pleased I had taken Super 8 footage of each wave he got but now with an article in mind, I took more stills shots of the area. We have now changed our minds about leaving Varkala today! Tomorrow morning I will take more stills of Phil surfing.

On the walk back along the cliff, an Australian guy stopped Phil and said, “I wanted to talk to you” and asked about the surf. I think the guy had been watching Phil surfing and was regretting not having a board with him. We saw Elizabeth, the only other yoga student at the class in Kovalam, on the way back as well. We continued our walk back along the cliff chatting to her as we went.

We returned satisfied to our room, Phil to shower and me to give a few minutes attention to all my camera gear, before going off for a well earned breakfast. A young man who works in the money changer/travel agent next door and who also helps out in the restaurant came to tell us that Tony Blair had been in a car accident and wasn’t expected to live. We were kind of shocked for a few minutes before we heard lots of laughter and realized that we had been the victims of an Indian April Fool’s joke! Apart from not even knowing really what day it was, we didn’t even know they had April Fool’s Day in India. He was so convincing too with the details of when it happened and how it happened. A British couple, who were here long term, had also been convinced by it. Strange subject matter for a joke though!

We sat watching the world go by and drinking cardamom tea to finish our breakfast off with. We were surprised to see a refuse collection arrive at one point, followed a little while later with another one. It must be dustbin day! I noted that the dustmen over here were just as bad as ours back home in that they dropped as much as they collected. It was however refreshing to see a collection being done as opposed to seeing the rubbish being burnt and then buried just below the surface on Kovalam beach. Obviously not enough refuse collections are done though as the surroundings are always pretty much covered in piles of litter.

After breakfast we went to look around the couple of bookstalls there were as I was reaching the end of the one book I had bought with me. I bought a book about a woman who rescues Indian dogs and other animals. I also took photos of various yoga signs to possibly go in a montage for the yoga article we are going to write. Feeling rather hot from the heat of the day, we returned to the coolness of our room to read and relax for a few hours. We also took the opportunity to do some much-needed washing. It’s amazing how relaxing being completely naked in a cool bathroom while thrashing your clothes against the wall, can be! I finished one book and then made a list of the presents I wanted to buy people (I’m planning on doing all my shopping in the last few days amongst all the numerous and colourful shops in Kovalam). There are so many lovely things in the shops that I know my mum would like. I kind of wish that she could be with me for a bit of a shop that is by far one of the girliest things I have ever said in my life (apart from one morning when I woke up and had a panic about what to wear for work that day). It’s going to be so



hard choosing some things for her out of the myriad of shops. Phil also spent some time reading his way amazingly quickly through the book I had bought earlier.

We went for lunch and I had chips, which is a bit unadventurous, but I just fancied some. Phil had a thali and I took a photograph of it for the Vegan magazine article we plan to write. I also photographed sections of the menu because I couldn't be bothered to write it all down and needed it for information for the article. I was also fast running out of paper in my journal. Phil spent the time eating and musing over whether our English flies would find food in India too spicy. He spent far too much time thinking about it and this led me to believe that the spicy food is probably getting to his head.



To walk off the food and lunacy that had developed we went for a walk to take a look at the temple along Beach Road. It really is quite a large temple and seems to be visited by a lot of people. At first we weren't sure if it was okay to take photos but after walking around the perimeter a little way we saw an Indian man taking photos so assumed it was okay. I still tried to do it from a respectful distance though. We took a little lane around the back where you were able to see into the grounds. There were quite a lot of people there in prayer but it seemed very peaceful and calming. The temple is only open to Hindus, which is understandable but disappointing, as I had wanted to make an offering to Ayappa – protector of forests and wild animals, in the hope that the hunt ban in England was successfully proceeding in Parliament. Inside the grounds we also saw the huge Banyan tree mentioned in Lonely Planet. We finally walked back around to the front where I wanted to get a shot of the huge flight of steps that rose steeply to the main entrance.

The temple is next to the sacred tank where people go to bathe and lots of people were



busy washing and swimming in the green water. On the way back to the temple we stopped off at a Kashmiri man's shop as he had made us promise a few days earlier to visit him with the lure of Kashmiri tea. He showed us numerous items but we weren't persuaded to buy and there was no sign of the promised tea.

We strolled along the beach as the sun starting setting, admiring the red cliffs made even redder by the low sun. Then we went to relax and read more in our room. At 8pm we went for dinner at our usual place and watched over the sea while, as usual, lightning lit up the sky at intervals, teasing us with the promise of another storm and more coolness to sleep in tonight. It didn't develop however and after a short walk to the Helipad, we returned to our room to rest enough and sleep so that we would be able to get up early again tomorrow.



Tuesday 2nd April 2002

This morning, after a good night's sleep, we managed to get up at 6.30am, although again we were bleary eyed, and stumble along to the surf spot. The surf looked good but when Phil went in he was taken by the rip twice the distance north along the coast he was taken yesterday. He'd paddled hard and got out 50 meters but had travelling about 300 meters sideways in the process. He ended up on the beach. Whilst he had been out there paddling away a local fisherman was trying to whistle and shout at him to try and get him to come in and was obviously concerned. We sat watching the waves for a while, as Phil didn't know whether to try again. Whilst we sat it started raining, which was quite pleasant at first cooling our skin, but then it got quite hard and we sheltered with the surfboard over our heads. While we were there we see a mongoose again amongst the rocks. Eventually it ceased but Phil had decided not to



try again as it did appear to be quite a dangerous rip out there today. However, all was not wasted as it gave him further information to use in the article.

We went back and rested and read in our room and were very tempted to have a snooze. However, we took ourselves off for breakfast and read instead at the table. I made some notes for the vegan magazine article also while we sat. I took a photo for the article of the Idiyappam that Phil had ordered. Today I tried the baked beans on toast for a change and they were kind of 'perfumed' tasting but okay. Then I had a fruit salad as I really felt like some fruit. After we sat drinking tea and reading and continued to do so for a few hours when we were hungry again! Phil had a puri masala and I had a banana fritter. Again we sat for a while. It seemed really quite hot today and we had a dog keeping in the shade under our table. I occasionally stroked her with my feet, causing her to stretch out further. While we sat an aircraft flew really low over

the cliff three times. We were told it was the coastguard.



When we eventually pulled ourselves out of our seats we went back to our room to shower and cool off and did succumb to a short catnap. Then we went to find a rickshaw to take us up the coast to Anjengo – 15km south of Varkala. We'd read in the Lonely Planet that it was a good drive. We negotiated the good price of Rs150 for the return journey and then set off, only briefly stopping off for fuel. The journey was mostly along beside the beach past thatched fishing villages. The road was a little to be desired, with many parts unmade, but it was fun bumping along with our enthusiastic driver telling us things that we mostly didn't understand (and vice versa). We did understand each other's giggles though and our driver certainly did plenty of that along the way, and quite infectiously so! We past many temples; some Hindu, some with a bit of a Buddhist feel, some mosques and a couple of Christian churches. It seemed that every few feet somebody would wave or shout hello and after a while you started to feel like a pop star or royalty. The villages had a social air with lots of people sitting in groups and chatting or playing cards. We also passed an elephant that was being washed in front of a temple with a crowd of people watching. The driver insisted on taking us on a short deviation (at no extra cost) to "The Golden Island". We didn't quite understand what it was, as it doesn't appear in any guidebooks, but we understood it to be a magnificent temple on an island in the middle of a lake. He took us to the edge of a lake, after seemingly getting lost for a while, and then chatted to a group of people. Then he said that we needed to negotiate a price for the boat trip across the lake with these people. Seeing as we couldn't see the temple and it was going to cost us extra to go in a boat that, quite frankly looked like it had been cut from a small trunk, we really didn't fancy it and declined the offer but thanked him for giving us the opportunity. He seemed disappointed, no doubt as he would have got a cut of the money, but on continuing to Anjengo he continued in his happy manner.

When we arrived in Anjengo we stopped off first at the remains of the British fortification built during the height of the spice trade. The building itself wasn't much to look at but the garden now inside it and overshadowed by the adjacent black and white striped lighthouse, gave it a lot of character. After walking around the entire wall of the fort, we decided to go to look at the beach. As we walked through the small alleyways towards the beach we were greeted constantly by the villagers and had an ever-growing following of children. As we reached the beach the question of "school pen?" came from the group of kids and no sooner had I got pens out, I was surrounded by a swarm of over-enthusiastic kids grabbing at everything. I felt like a small fish surrounded by a shoal of piranhas and got a tiny bit



panicky about my camera being whisked off. Some of them were putting their hands in my bum bag and nearly pulled out the tampons I had in it. I'm not sure what they would have made of them if they had – small school pen perhaps?! With all the pens gone, and thankfully nothing else, we carried on a small distance along the beach, still followed by the ever-growing crowd of kids still demanding pens. We forgot that out of the tourist areas the beaches tend to be used more as toilets and I managed to step in something unpleasant along those lines – nice! With the flocking children (who also seemed to increase in size and age) and the unwelcome attachment to my sandal, we decided it was time to leave. Our rickshaw driver had come down to



the beach, possibly concerned at the attention we were getting, so we indicated to him that we would like to go now. As there really wasn't anything else to see in the village and we had caused enough of a commotion, we drove back.

All the way back we received the same 'royal' welcome and two young men greeted Phil, shaking his hand quickly as we drove past, with such enthusiasm that they looked near to fainting! We also saw an elephant going along the road (possibly the same one we had seen earlier being washed) and I managed to get a photo of it. The driver asked us whether we "liked the smell of Indians" and screwed up his nose a little. We weren't quite sure what he meant and what had been lost in the translation so just said yes, which was greeted with his usual giggle.

We arrived back in Varkala, a little overwhelmed with our experience, but happy with it. It had also been a cooling ride on a hot day. We spent a little time showering (and cleaning our sandals!) and relaxing before we went out for our dinner at the usual restaurant. Despite the hot day the evening had brought us a cooling breeze to enjoy during our meal. We changed some more money and then walked up to the Helipad, which is becoming our after-dinner ritual now. Phil had a dog running at him on the way up there. We don't know what in particular the dog decided was wrong with Phil or why it choose to run at his legs but eventually it left him alone and we sat in peace watching the slight lightning flashes in the sky and enjoying the cool breeze. We returned to the restaurant to get some bottles of water. There are so many different brands of bottled water for sale in India; Aquva Gold, Kinley, Gold Drops, Silent Valley, Green Valley, Bisleri, Vasha, Pondicherry and probably the most amusing brand, Good Luck! We hoped that the latter named wasn't an indication of the quality of the water! Some of the bottled water is actual mineral water whilst some of it is just treated drinking water. Unfortunately, with recycling not being a thing that is implemented in India, most of the empty plastic bottles end up in piles on the streets or being burnt and buried somewhere. It's such a shame that you can't just drink the water from the tap or even chance brushing your teeth with the water. I hate to think how many bottles we would get through during our stay but we have to keep drinking lots of water.

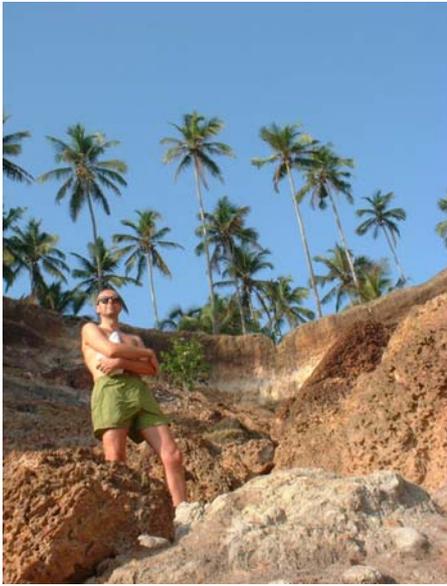
A man asked us how long we were staying. He was a taxi driver after a fare and he said that he would give us a good price when we left. We said that we would tell him when we were going to leave. He noted that Phil had a surfboard and took some interest in it but he actually referred to it as a 'swimming boat', which was quite funny. We returned to our room to have a final shower before reading and then bed.

Wednesday 3rd April 2002



We got up at 6.30am and walked along to the surf spot. At first Phil managed to get out quite far quite quickly but then a set of waves came in and things got harder. Eventually he did get out but had to constantly paddle against the rip to stay in the same place. He managed two short waves before he finally gave up and came in. However, I did managed to get photos of the waves he got so he was at least pleased about that. All in all it was another learning experience and provided us with more photos for the article. After he got out a fisherman came striding over. He didn't speak much English but it was apparent that he was very interested in the surfboard as he kept touching it and feeling it's weight before giving us the thumbs up, saying goodbye and striding off again. He had Phil was American as well. It seems that not many surfers





must come around these parts as great interest is shown in the surfboard and whenever Phil goes in he tends to draw a bit of a crowd.

While I was on the rocks watching Phil surf I saw the mongoose again, well it's tail anyway! It was going in the same direction at the same time but still it continues to evade my camera.

After a quick cool down in the room we went for our usual breakfast and relax session. Because it was all so much work sitting, reading and eating, we then retired to our room for more of the same but this time under the cool fan, as the day really seemed to be heating up. We



ended up falling asleep and waking at 1.30pm when we decided to go for lunch, where we continued to read for quite some time after. It's a hard life! However, we then decided that we had been far too lazy and decided to go for a walk south along the coast. We started up rock hopping right down by the sea but then found a way up onto the cliff where we ended up taking a detour onto a road and going through a small village. One of the children in the village asked me for a school pen and then a few more kids appeared, quickly followed by some of their mothers. I gave them all pens and then asked if I could take their photos. I had the digital camera with me so was able to show them the photos I had taken and they seemed amazed to see themselves in the photo. I took their addresses so I could send them copies of the photos.

In the next village along we met a fisherman and chatted for a while. Then we met his kids and they asked for a school pen. Again I took photos of them, showed them and got their address to send prints to. We met another family



a bit further down and it seemed that word was out about the photos and pens so I gave them my last pens and took more photos and promised to send prints. Some of the kids were using part of a palm leaf as a rocking horse and just at the moment I took one photo it broke, causing them to giggle mid-shot.

We headed back along the top of the cliff and then the beach at Varkala. When we reached our room we decided to go up onto the roof to do a little bit of yoga and managed 30 minutes before dark. Then we showered and went out for dinner, which was as usual lovely. We went out to 'our bench' on the helipad for a short time after dinner and sat listening to the sea and looking at the stars. There was only a small amount of distant lightning tonight. We then returned to sleep.



Thursday 4th April 2002

Again we got up at 6.30am and this morning felt quite bright and breezy. We skipped along to the surf spot and at first it looked quite small so Phil managed to get out there quite easily. He got a fair few waves and I got a fair few photos for the article. Phil was very happy.

I also took some cool photos of Ospreys and Kites that were flying above. These birds of prey tend to flock together (2 different sorts) cruising the breeze above the cliffs and the sea. They are constantly pursued by gangs of house s, which I think is quite brave given the difference in size between them. I saw one Osprey today swooping down to the top of a wave to catch a fish.



The mongoose evaded my camera again though for the fourth day running. I saw it briefly before it darted into a rock no less than 2 meters away but it was too quick for me to get the camera on it. Five seconds later it was already a considerable distance away. I've named it Michael for some reason and have noticed that it follows near enough the exact path at the same day every day. It is also around about the time the wind switches round to onshore and we have called this wind switch 'the mongoose wind'!



After walking back along the cliff, with the heat rising, and feeling well pleased with both the surfing and the photos,



we returned to our room to shower briefly before breakfast. Over breakfast we reviewed the photos on the digital camera and deleted the ones we didn't want to keep to free up some space. We read for a bit and I stroke 'under table dog' with my foot while she stretched out and dozed. We seemed to have named various dogs around the place according to their characteristics; funny-eyed dog, wrinkle head dog, corkscrew tail dog, mangy dog, pupskies (the puppies who mischievously follow us along the cliff in the morning nipping at Phil's heels) and chomping dog (who was originally called green-snot dog but we changed it because we thought it's chomping teeth habit was a little more pleasant than the green snot it had hanging from its nose).

We stocked up on toilet paper and washing powder and then decided to go to look for books again because we had both finished all our books. We found a couple of books by Khushwant Singh, a well-known Indian author, which looked interesting and we struck a good deal for them. Then we went looking for a yoga sign we had seen previously. It read, "helping victims of Indian spirituality" and we wanted to take a photo of it for the yoga article but we couldn't find it. We walked to Temple junction to see about getting a rickshaw to go to the supermarket in Varkala town. We struck a good deal and enjoyed the short but cooling drive to the town. We stopped right outside the supermarket which was small but well stocked and we not only found the paper we had gone to buy (my journal had practically no space left in it write in anymore) but we also found some laddoo. We didn't want to stay in the busy, dusty and hectic environment of the town so we headed straight back in the same rickshaw. Then we returned to our room to eat laddoo and drink plenty of cool water before heading off to the beach.

We stayed on the beach for a couple of hours reading and soaking up the sun. Then the heat got too much and we were thankful for a lovely cool shower. I then headed to the restaurant because I had asked if I could take a photo of the staff in front of the restaurant for our vegan magazine article. Both the waiters were there, along with the owner and the chef. I also asked them if they knew a recipe for laddoo and they said they would get back to me with it. An American woman from San Francisco had overheard my conversation with the staff about the article and it turns out she was vegan. We chatted for a while and I said that at dinnertime I would bring my Vegan Passport with me to show her if she was around.

We then returned to the room and grabbed our yoga stuff and went onto the roof, managing about 55 minutes today. Phil then went to see the man in the yoga ashram for a massage while I did some washing and some sorting out before getting myself ready for the evening. Phil returned looking very shiny from his massage. It had been an okay massage but very very oily, which made for a slippery time in the shower for him as he attempted to wash it all off! Phil had been told that the massage man never set prices but let people give him donations. Phil had no idea really what to offer him but he thought Rs 200 was good. However, it turned out that he wanted Rs 100 more than that! After 'de-oiling' we went out for dinner at the restaurant. The American woman was there so I took over my vegan passport for her to look at. We both ordered pineapple and grape juice to begin with as I had had it for the first time this morning and it was really nice. After dinner we were really quite tired so gave the Helipad a miss and headed off to bed.



Friday 5th April 2002

We got up at 6.30am again and went off surfing. Again it looked quite small and Phil managed to get out there really quickly. The wind changed around at the usual time but today I didn't see Michael the Mongoose. It could have been something to do with the three noisy kids who walked along the cliff behind and hung around for a bit or he might just have had something better to do. Instead I met another Michael, an English man from Yorkshire who was taking a walk along a small track under the cliffs and enjoying the morning coolness.

Phil managed to get a few waves here and there but on the whole it wasn't as good as it had been. I got a few photographs. After we walked back along the cliff, stopping briefly to chat with Michael (the man not the mongoose) again and the American vegan woman and her friend (who was a long boarder from Brighton) about the surf. We then returned to our room for a while. Phil did my washing for me, which was very lovely of him, and then we went for breakfast. In the restaurant we saw a lizard climbing up one of the palms and I managed to get a photo of it. We sat eating breakfast and reviewing the surf photos when the battery warning light came up on the camera. I must find some way of charging them. The first set had lasted 2 ½ weeks but this set had only lasted about 3 or 4 days, probably because of all the reviewing and deleting of photos we have been doing. I have all the necessary equipment to charge them and there is a plug in the room but the charger on the adapter seems too heavy to stay in the plug. We will have to rig something up to make it stay there later.

For breakfast I decided to try upma, a bowl shaped serving of semolina and vegetables served with curry. We sat for a while reading after. I was feeling really tired, hot and bloated today (probably due to the onset on my period) and so we went back to read under the coolness of the fan. I ended up sleeping for two hours and probably could have slept more but was frustrated about my sleepiness and concerned about wasting the day so we went for lunch. Even if we sat watching the world go by it is better than sleeping all day.

After we sat again reading and then continued doing so for a while back under the fan in our room. At about 5pm, we decided to go for a walk along the cliff and surf spots and for Phil to draw a diagram of the cliff and surf information for the article. As we walked, collecting a following of dogs along the way, the air cooled and dark, dark clouds marched in from inland. I have never seen such weirdly moving clouds in my life. They were kind of 'exploding' out and then swirling around in a manner that befits the scene of a storm in a movie. Some clouds that had moved out over the cliff to sea started moving back again to mix and mingle with those moving out. We even saw what looked like the beginnings of a tail of a whirlwind from under one cloud. The wind picked up and the light was amazing and I wished I had my camera on me but would have been concerned about the rain that was inevitably going to come. The wind picked up so much that we became concerned about falling coconuts and palms. Strangely given the darkness, it was the furthest we had ever been able to see along the coast to the far headland. Shortly after the thunder started and the shop owners and restaurants were furiously packing away. Phil was trying to finish his diagram and I watched the sky and stroked the dogs. There was a mass of birds of prey circling above in the sky. There must have been at least 100 together in one flock and, coming from a country where you very rarely see more than two birds of prey together, it was an amazing sight. Then the rain started and it wasn't long before we were running for shelter to the Kerala restaurant, the last one on the north of the cliff. Here we sat watching the rainfall, the wind blow, the lightning and listening to the crashing thunder. Meanwhile we drank Jal Geera (mint tea with cumin seeds and herbs), which Phil adored. Phil also ordered thattu dosa with samba and coconut chutney, which he really enjoyed too. My experience of the storm was only slightly marred by worrying about whether the battery charger in the room would have done disastrous things in the midst of the high-powered lightning (e.g. meltdown and fire) and the ensuing power cut outs. The storm eventually passed and we returned in the cool twilight, dodging puddles along the way. We noticed weird



patches on the surface of the sea. I had just started getting excited thinking it might be whales or dolphins but we were told that they were shoals (or balls) of fish. It was an amazing sight, as there were so many dotted all over. We realized now how easy the fish were to spot and why there was always a man shouting and waving like crazy from the rocks to the fishermen in Kovalam.



On reaching our room, all was well and the charger was still merrily charging away. We showered and read for a while before going for dinner. Just before we sat down the chef called us over. He had made some laddoos for us but had kind of had to make up the recipe as the bakers apparently keep the recipe secret, as he found out. They tasted not exactly like the ones we had had but not far off. He

told us how he made them and let us keep some to have for afters. It was really nice of him to have gone to so much trouble. Over dinner we read and I also caught up with my journal. The evening was lovely and cool.

The taxi driver who had been asking us for days when we were leaving caught up with us. We told him we were leaving tomorrow and he offered us his taxi to Kovalam for the same price we had paid for a rickshaw to get here (Rs 400). It appears he has a friend in Kovalam he wants to visit so is happy to go anyway. We accepted knowing that it was not only a very good deal but also about 30 minutes quicker. We agreed to meet him at 2.30pm outside the room tomorrow. It will be sad to leave Varkala as I've grown to really love the place – much assisted by the lovely staff at the restaurant and the cool breeze that comes off the sea over the cliffs. After dinner we went up to the Helipad to enjoy the coolness of a Varkala night for the last time before retiring to our room for the night.

Saturday 6th April 2002

The alarm went at 6.30am. Phil went to look to see what the surf was doing just over the cliff. I got ready anyway but he returned to say it would be too small at the other end of the cliff so he didn't want to be bothered to go out. However, we decided to take advantage of the cooler morning and go for a walk along the cliff anyway – maybe with the last chance to try and catch a glimpse of Michael the Mongoose. When we got there we didn't see him but he was



probably hiding, as there were masses of men pulling in fishing nets. We sat watching while they went about doing this and began to find it fascinating. As the nets got nearer and nearer we found ourselves willing them on – which is really strange for vegans! The actual net that the fish get caught in is very small in comparison to the bigger net that is attached to. This bigger net although the fish could swim through it, actually pushes the fish further towards the smaller net, with the help of swimmers who have gone into the sea shouting and

thrashing the water. Meanwhile the net is pulled closer and closer to the shore by two lines of men each holding the two ends of the U-shaped net. It is the way they have fished for hundreds of years. The small net is finally brought in and the hundreds of little fish and dozens of larger fish are sorted and distributed. There were at least three of these nets out so the shoreline was teeming with activity.

After we went back to the Kerala restaurant (where we had sheltered yesterday in the storm) for breakfast and sat watching what Phil described as his favourite view in Varkala – which of course it would be because it's where he goes surfing! We took a slow walk back along the cliff as the heat was building and back to our room to pack before going for a casual lunch for the last time at Oottupura. I took a photo of the laughing waiter – Krishna – as he wasn't around when I did the main photos. The problem was every time I went to take the photo he would be all-serious then after he would laugh. It seems to be the thing with Indians that you have to look all-serious in photos – it was the same the other day with our giggling rickshaw driver.

We said our goodbyes to all the staff and Andy and Sarah (the couple who had been staying long term), settled our bill and were give Oottupuru's email address. Then we waited for the taxi to arrive at our room before loading up and setting off for our hour-long journey to back to Kovalam. The driver was kind enough to point our certain landmarks and explain things to us but it was unfortunate we found it hard to understand him – and vice versa. It took quite a while before we realized that the shepherd man he was talking of that lived in London actually referred to Shepherds Bush in London but quite what he meant beyond that was unclear. He then 'treated' us to the latest in Bollywood music, which although we were unable to understand the lyrics and the voice of the 10 year old screaming girl that seemed to feature in every song, was bound to have been love song after love song. Do Indians sing about anything else I wonder?



We had become reasonably happy and comfortable about the way driving over here was conducted. However, our driver had a spot of road rage (well he waved his hand out of the window which is the most we had ever seen in India) when a bus was approaching us on the wrong side of the road, forcing him to avoid it. He said that Indian drivers were crazy and then proceeded to overtake the next vehicle in the face of oncoming traffic quite calmly. We also saw a woman learning to drive and could only wonder at how the hell they taught the Highway Code out here and felt great respect for any learners. The driving instructor did however have a firm grip with one hand on the wheel, perhaps waiting to assist her when the next oncoming vehicle forces a swerving manoeuvre on them. We arrived safe and well, with the backdrop of building clouds, in Kovalam only to find our way blocked by road resurfacing. We ended up having to walk a little way back to Hari's but arrived shortly before the rain came down. We took in the clothes that were on the line, which we assumed belonged to the people that were now staying at Hari's. It kind of returned the favour of Hari's wife bringing ours in one day before a storm. We unpacked in our old room hoping it was okay to as nobody was around. Then we went for a walk and to enquire about a yoga class (Astanga) that we had noticed earlier when walking back into Kovalam. There was another woman waiting to ask too. The teacher arrived and was recognized by the woman who immediately said to him that we were interested in the class, without mentioning herself. The teacher, a bearded, orange-clad swami character explained the time it was (2 hours) and how much (Rs 200) and told us we were welcome. We said we would go tomorrow evening and left walking down with the woman towards the beach. She said she had done a class with him before and didn't particularly enjoy it and that she didn't think it was Astanga either. We thanked her for her thoughts and headed for the German Bakery for our long awaited peanut butter on wholegrain toast and Kashmiri tea. Oh Kashmiri tea, how wonderful it is! We sat watching the sun go down and then walked back along the front to check whether the 8am yoga class was still on at the Sea Coast (which it was) and to see what films were showing tonight. Vanilla Sky was on at the Coconut Grove at 7pm and with time pushing on; we quickly went and changed just in enough time. Strangely I wasn't at all hungry so we sat having drinks but we went along to Shiva's Moon after the film so that Phil could eat.

It was actually quite cool and we walked back along the coast after dinner enjoying it. A festival is just about to start based around the temple next to Hari's. He warned us that it could be noisy at all hours for a few days so we were expecting to return to our room amidst loads of noise but all was quiet and we settled down for the night.

Sunday 7th April 2002

Hari had warned us! At 3am the fireworks started. I work up with a 'Jesus Christ' and we both grumbled and jumped. My bladder had also woken up and I made a visit to the loo before grumbling my way back to bed. Various other noises



continued throughout the night but the fireworks subsided for a while. Then at 5am we were woken by two very loud bangs. I muttered 'crazy Indians' into Phil's chest but managed to get to sleep again. We had on the whole managed more sleep than you would imagine given the circumstances and this was apparently going to be the worst night of the next few days...apparently. At 6.30am the alarm went and Phil decided to go and check the surf. I snoozed a while in relative peace. Phil returned and said the surf was okay but that he gone for an early morning swim instead.



We decided to go to the 8am yoga class and so with the temple building up to a noisy momentum and the our ears ringing from the noise coming from the speakers in the street, we walked to yoga. Today it was a different teacher. There were three of us and on the whole Phil and I didn't enjoy it as much. There was too much emphasis on meditation and the time spent doing this cross-legged really cut off my blood supply to my legs, let alone my brain! We only did a few proper asanas and we both decided that we probably wouldn't return tomorrow. It is meant to be stimulating and relaxing not an ordeal. We would see what this evening's Astanga class would bring us.

After we went for breakfast at the German Bakery – more Kashmiri tea and toast and peanut butter! I caught up on my journal while Phil read and watched the surf. Eventually he decided to go and get his surfboard and go in. I stayed where I was. The fruit women were having some kind of argument and every now and again their shrill voices would rise up over the sound of the rolling waves. I dragged out my tea and a bottle of water for so long before I got the idea that it was time to leave (assisted by one of the waiters pouring my teacup to the brim with the remaining tea in the pot – cheeky bugger!). I went out and sat on the edge of the pathway watching Phil surfing. I had to fend off a constant barrage of beach sellers though. One guy, after I had given the usual 'no' to his 'Later?' question then said 'tomorrow?' and I said no and he then said 'never?' before giggling and walking off. Phil came out from a fun surf and

we went back for Phil to change and shower before we headed to Red Star for some lunch. Phil had a thali but only found out after that the 'special recipe' dal had curds in it. I had a simple garlic and tomato chapatti which was only slightly marred by the fact that every time I took a mouthful the two Indian gentleman sat next to me, who were wanting to train in England as doctors, asked one question after another about various aspects of costs, funding and accommodation in England.

After we returned to our room, only briefly going out for me to change some money, before kicking back and relaxing for a while reading. Just as we were getting ready to go to the evening yoga class, the heavens opened. Even the temple next door stopped its noisy proceedings in the downpour. While their speakers got a drenching, we waited while the thunder rolled. Then it stopped and we were able to sprint along to the class only 10 minutes late. This didn't bother 'the swami' (as he liked to be referred to) who was stretched on his bed, draped in orange, reading in his cavernous room which was completely bare save the bed. We proceeded to sit on the floor on grass mats while he began to explain various aspects of what he was going to teach, going off on various tangents including giving us a full blown history lesson on the old colonies of the UK. All the time he spoke he directed his words at Phil, only occasionally glancing in my direction. Eventually he got around to doing some asanas, but this was well beyond the time we had given up on doing anything but talking. The asanas started off with weird head jerking exercises, quite unlike anything Phil or I had even seen as part of any yoga. He also told us to push each movement to the point of pain, which is something we were always told not to do. He referred to the names of the asanas often contrary to our known names of them (e.g. Locust was called Fish according to him) but then, although his body was reasonably fit for a 69 year old, his mind was a little befuddled, as the old bugger couldn't even count properly. His asanas for the brain obviously hadn't proved very effective it seems! I did however manage a headstand briefly, which is something I'd never really done before. At the end he called us over and he sat on his bed. He put our names in a register and marked us as present. He had been a schoolteacher before he became a swami but it was obvious that this was an aspect of his life he had been unable to let go! He then told us about his wife and son and how he had left his old life to become a swami. He showed us photos of his first student. We then paid and left and spent the walk back along the beach perusing our thoughts on the class, examining the mossy bites we had gained during it and deciding whether to go back or not tomorrow night. He had asked us how long we were still in Kovalam and we had told him four days so he had assumed we would be back for the duration of the rest of our stay. We decided to sleep on it.

We quickly changed and headed off to catch the 8.30pm film at Hawah Beach, which was 'Training Day', and at the same time we ate our dinner. It was quite late by the time we had finished and most places were closed. However the temple celebrations were still in full swing with something that sounded like a Radio 4 play, Hindu style. We turned in for the night, Phil with his earplugs firmly in place.

Monday 8th April 2002

We were thankfully not woken up at 3am this morning but were at 5.13am (to be exact by Phil's watch!) by the loud fireworks that we had mostly become accustomed to (but not at this hour). This was followed by more love song pop songs (presumably), which, at this hour or any hour come to think of it, aren't terribly lovable.

With no 8 am yoga class to go to we stayed in bed to 9am but with the constant background of the temple sounds. We immediately went to re-confirm our flight details, which turned into a bit of an ordeal for Phil as he strained to understand a word of the woman who was on the other end of the phone. It was very lovely of the people in the money-exchange place where we did it to not charge us for the use of their phone. We were advised to re-confirm our confirmation later on in the day, as it seems they didn't even trust the bureaucratic procedures of their own countrymen! We said we would return later. I also unknowingly left my Vegan Passport behind.

We went to see Lily to eat the jackfruit we had promised but there had been none at the market this morning so we had mango and coconut instead. When I gave her Rs 100 for it (much more than it should have been) she gave us a couple of bananas as well and said she promised to see if the market had jackfruit tomorrow. We looked around a few shops for the first time during our stay in India as time was running short now and we wanted to take gifts home for family. We bought some organic spices and I bought some bowls made from coconut shells that came with little coconut spoons as well. Phil looked at the surf and decided to go out so after returning to get the surf stuff he went while I vowed to get some present shopping done. I went from shop to shop looking, boggle-eyed with the amount of designs and colours of everything. I bought two cushion covers for my sister and a top for my mum and a lampshade for mum and dad. I'd only got a little way along the front though before I got collared by a fruit lady who charged me an extortionate amount for coconut water that I hadn't really wanted. I really should be firmer at saying no. Thankfully I was saved by seeing



Phil come out of the sea and went off to meet him. God knows what other fruit I would have ended up with if I'd stayed longer!

We went for lunch at Lonely Planet, which was lovely. I had idly and Phil had Puri Masala. We then went on Phil's idea of hell – shopping – to buy more presents. Covering the whole of the front of the seafront we trailed from one shop to another getting confused but succeeding at least in making some good purchases. One shop professed to know the size of the person we were buying a top for while another, that we had been in earlier, dropped their price considerably on their bed throws. We will go back again and then go to leave and watch the price drop again!

Later we reconfirmed our confirmation at the money exchange and they gave me back my Vegan Passport I had left there earlier. Then we headed off to the beach – Phil to surf and me to try body boarding again. On the way, Phil gave some tropical surf wax to a local surfer he had got friendly with. I paid for a boogie board from Lalitha, the nice lady who hires the boards, umbrellas and chairs with her husband. However, I returned shortly after to return the board swearing and cursing at the 'IMS' that was prevalent on the beach today. The 'IMS' are the 'Indian Men Syndrome', namely the groups of men who walk up and down the beach and stare at the western women. Phil told me that coach tours are operated in India for natives to go and look at the western people in the tourist areas. I guess because western women wear less clothing than Indian women it must appear fascinating to them to see them but it is also so intimidating and annoying. Sometimes they stand really close to women who are sunbathing and just stare or gather at the shore right next to where women are swimming. It's just not very nice and really can't do the tourist trade much good. I could almost understand it if the women were topless or something but all the women I saw were wearing perfectly respectable swimming costumes or bikinis. I don't know why buy today I finally lost it with them. I explained to Lalitha who had come running over to see what was up and she was very understanding. She said she didn't understand why they stared, as, apart from the colour of the skin, all the women were the same underneath. The sea had proved to be quite rough anyway and so she said that she would let me have the board again tomorrow instead. I sat chatting with her under her umbrella while Phil went to have a little surf. She was so sweet, even offering me a bit of her chikkee (peanut brittle) and then insisting I sat on a chair of hers.

Phil wasn't out for long as it wasn't that good but I had seen him get at least one good long wave. We then went to get ready for our second two hour-long Swami yoga experience. This time we put on mossy repellent and we arrived 15 minutes early but he was happy to start early. He had said that after the first session we wouldn't talk as much but it seemed he may have forgotten this and started the lesson by going on about an IBM hotel he worked at in Germany, although I really can't remember what the relevance was or indeed if there was one. I sat on the mat directly in front of him this time but this failed to change the fact that he mostly directed his teaching at Phil and even most of the praise towards 'his young man'. Today we had more biological lessons particularly about the size of the human brain as opposed to those of other animals and how superior we were. This biological lecture extended to explaining how the liver digests food – funny that as we thought that was the job of the stomach!

He also lectured us in the importance of trying to become vegetarian, completely ignoring our comments about the fact that we were already long term vegans. That could have saved us 15 minutes of his waffle if he had listened. We went through all the same jerky, funny asanas he claimed were the '16 most important asanas' out of his 'well researched own opinion', again telling us we needed to feel pain. He made frequent wild claims about certain asanas such as their anti-arthritis properties, which were not much in evidence, as he had to take his time getting back off of the floor.

There was more too. He went on about human beings being the only species that exhibit choice using some weird example of a snake and a bowl of milk somewhere along the line. It seemed pointless arguing with him as he seemed unwilling to do anything but talk at us. Maybe we should have exhibited our choice and left at this stage but some masochistic influence prevailed and left us cross-legged and fighting off mosses on the grass mats in front of him.

We moved onto pranayama breathing and again various tangents went off on a walk in his mind. Ironically he discussed the importance of not talking and being quiet in your life – advise he would do well to self-prescribe. This was topped off with his question about whether as a couple we argued or not. When we said that we didn't he told us that surely therefore we weren't deeply in love with each other! Bearing in mind he had already told us the importance of not being angry in our lives, he now told us it was necessary by arguing in our relationship. He then quoted the famous guru of broken marriages, Elizabeth Taylor, who had apparently once said in a TV interview that it was necessary to argue to have a good relationship.

At the end he was going on about what we were going to do in the next session and I had to tell him that we had no intention of returning. Although I respected what he had taught us and shared with us, it wasn't for me. I also said that I believed he must be more used to teaching men than women but whether he got the hint about this I'm not sure – probably not as after all he didn't really listen much to what I said. I said I wanted to be honest and preferred to tell him we weren't returning so he didn't wait for us tomorrow. We paid him and he gave us a worksheet of his 'perfect yoga work-out' to go away with and we said our thanks and goodbyes, relieved that we wouldn't be returning for another two hour lecture.

We then got ready to go out for food. It seems we were being fussy tonight and spent 40 minutes studying various sea-front restaurant menus. We refused to eat anywhere where live lobsters were kept in tanks and where the menu wasn't very vegetarian. Amidst all the mayhem we cause at restaurants along the way (in one place saying we were of the 'vegan religion' just so that they might understand!) the man in the shop where the 'price falling bed throws' were, came running out shouting Rs 150 and waving one around! We may go and visit him tomorrow again at those prices! One of the restaurant people shouted, "Go to Lonely Planet" (hopeful a suggestion to go to the restaurant rather than an insult of some kind!) and we thought why hadn't we thought of that. We ended up having lovely food and I even strangely fancied a Pepsi. I had a lot of journal to catch up on so I wrote a fair amount of it while I ate. Phil even let me play with the restaurant puppy for a while without frowning (her name is Sophie and she has huge ears and sharp puppy teeth), but then she didn't seem to have fleas and was very well cared for by the owner of the restaurant.



We then headed back home to try and sleep with the backdrop of the temple celebrations (generally lots of music which didn't appear to be playing to anyone except sleeping old men on benches inside the temple grounds who looked like they'd had too much coconut toddy). Phil's earplugs were put in and windows were shut to block out at least 20% of the noise as well as the mossys. We prayed to the god of silence before switching off the light.



Tuesday 9th April 2002

We didn't really need the alarm this morning as our alarm call had been one and half-hour earlier from the temple next door. We stayed in bed reading until about 7.30am, got ready and headed off to the beach. I hired a chair and an umbrella from Lalitha and continued reading while Phil went for a surf. After not too long he returned and we sat watching for Lily to have our jackfruit for breakfast. Eventually she came along with a huge piece of jackfruit and prepared it for us. There was so much we asked Lalitha and Lily to share it with us. We all sat eating and chatting under the shade of the umbrella. It was really nice. After a while we gave Lily Rs 100 and asked her if this was okay. She smiled and said that she would give us a present of a coconut later. We thanked her for getting the jackfruit for us. We arranged with Lalitha to come back later to use the chair and umbrella again and went back to our room to 'de-sand'.

I changed some more money for the final onslaught of shopping. I saw a top I liked but the sleeves weren't a good fit so they agreed to alter it for me. I paid Rs 110 for it, which was a bargain. I arranged to go back and pick it up later in the day. Then I went to see the girls who ran the shop where I wanted to get a throw for mum and dad and a few other bits. I got the throw, two elephant rope hanging things and some sandalwood necklaces and agreed the price of Rs 1100 – again not a bad price really considering I had seen the throw alone priced at Rs 1200 in another shop. I left the stuff there to pick up later to save carrying it around. We then hit the seafront again – first to the Rs150 bed throw man's shop. However it seemed we now might have imagined him shouting this last night, as they wouldn't budge below Rs 200 even if we bought several so we left. We then went to the shop that we had bought stuff at yesterday (mums elephant top) and Phil chose two lunghis and we looked at bed throws. After we had practically filled the shop floor with all the different colours and chosen ones without imperfections, we negotiated the good price of Rs 1350 for two lunghis and five throws.

Retracing our steps we collected all of our shopping and went to Lonely Planet for a lunch break and a much-needed shopping break. After we went to drop everything off at our room, change some more money and then headed off up the road inland for Phil to buy some more Chandrika soap from the local shop. We caused some confusion about the free spoons you receive with the current Chandrika offer but eventually they found them. We popped across the road to a bookshop, which was bare but did surprisingly have some good stuff in it. Phil picked up a Khushwant Singh's Joke Book, a Reiki book he'd never seen before and a Kerala T-shirt for a friend. I got a book about the heart for my dad (not very Indian but hopefully interesting to him as it is about heart disease and stopping it the natural way) and a Celtic Raga audiotape. We then dropped this consignment off to our room before hitting the sea-front shops again and hopefully for the final time! We found more T-shirts for presents, Phil found a Kashmiri photo frame for his mum and some wooden back massagers, a wallet for use at his workplace and a sandalwood necklace for Kim. I bought

two vest tops for myself – one being a Ganesh one – before we returned to collect my altered top from earlier in the day.

All our shopping was complete and we decided to go and relax back on the beach. I resumed my hire of the chair and the umbrella from this morning and Phil went for a quick surf. I only moved to take a photograph of Shaji, the local surfer, and Phil holding up their surfboards. They went our surfing together but, despite checking the other beach as well, it wasn't that good and it wasn't long before Phil was back. We sat watching the sun sink. We also showed Lalitha the postcards of Devon and Cornwall that we had brought from home so she could see where we lived.

We then headed back to our room to shower and get ready for dinner at Lonely Planet. We saw Hari briefly before going out and he looked tired because of all the work he'd been doing for the temple celebrations. I asked him what was happening with the celebrations. He advised us that it was going to a late night again and that tomorrow it may be a good photo opportunity as there was some kind of parade, with all the children dressed up, at 5pm. I think I will get my cameras ready for this.

We then went for a lovely dinner at Lonely Planet. I had banana flower with rice, which was delicious. After we headed to the Hawah Beach Restaurant to watch the 8.30pm film – Evolution – which turned out to be pretty crap really. If you ever get the chance, don't go and see it! I had a Pina Colada while watching the film. I'd never had one before and probably wouldn't bother again as it was quite hard to drink but you've got to try these things haven't you?! Even the masala peanuts I ordered were a bit strange. I had been expecting a bowl of peanuts but instead I got a plate of peanuts mixed with salad.

We were going to sit on or walk along the beach before going to bed but decided to brave the temple-celebration noise. As we walked up the road the now familiar speakers blaring out some kind of play accompanied by dramatic music every now and then greeted us. We decided to walk along to the temple to see actually how many people were listening to it – just to annoy ourselves further it seems! As last night, there were only a few people sleeping or milling about. We walked back scowling wondering what the point was of all the noise and what the hell it was all about. Then we saw people scurrying up an alleyway that goes behind the temple (and Hari's place) and by the time we got into Hari's garden we finally saw what was happening. A huge crowd of people was gathered in the area behind the temple, engrossed in watching a play on a makeshift stage. We felt a little happier and a little less perturbed at the noise now that we knew it was actually being listened to!

With that we returned to our room but instead of torturing ourselves into sleeping with this background of noise, we busied ourselves nail clipping, washing, journal writing, mossy hunting and moth removing (via our well adapted cockroach catching plastic bag method). Phil also went to feed the ants some laddoo outside, which sounds kind of crazy but not in this crazy Indian world where people stay up until 1am watching crazy plays then let off fireworks at 3am before starting full noisy proceedings at 5am again. Actually the laddoos had gone off and he didn't know what else to do with them, so he wasn't really being crazy. It just sounded like he was when he announced that he was "going outside to feed the ants"!

Eventually we went to bed and eventually the crazy theatre next door went quiet.

Wednesday 10th April 2002

Despite the noise from the temple we didn't get a bad nights sleep. We even stayed in bed until past 9am and it was relatively quiet for a change. We got up and headed to the beach to see Lily for our morning fruit breakfast but she wasn't there yet so we went to see Lalitha. I hired a chair and an umbrella and Phil went to have a surf but wasn't out for long as it wasn't very good. We sat for a while watching the sea and occasionally a big wave would come in and sweep up the beach and over the sand bank, causing people to run after floating sandals and various other items before they got swept out to sea. We had to put our shoes up balanced on the umbrella supports and Lalitha had to run after a body board that nearly got taken by the sea as well.

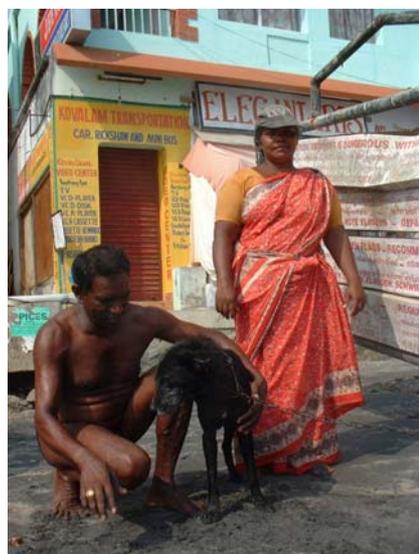
We still hadn't seen Lily but after a while Lalitha actually went to find her for us, which was really sweet of her. Lily prepared us mango, papaya and coconut, which was very welcome. As usual we gave her Rs 100, which she was very happy about. We sat for a while but eventually the heat got too much to sit around in comfortably so after a quick dip in the really quite rough sea, we headed back to our room, showered and de-sanded. I packed quite a lot of stuff, Phil went to change some money and then we went to Lonely Planet for some lunch; masala dosa for Phil and tomato oompathum for me.



We went back to the beach and took photos of Lalitha and Lily for memories sake before we had some Kashmiri tea at the German Bakery. I also gave Lalitha some chickpea I had bought for her as she had offered me some the other day. We sat drinking our tea and watching the surf. We walked along the beachfront checking travel agents trying to find out exactly how much departure tax we would have to pay tomorrow. Nobody seemed to know. We also saw



Lalitha's husband giving their dog, Tony, a wash in the sea. Tony didn't like it much and one tourist even went over to show concern but he was okay really just a bit disgruntled. I made the mistake of going to stroke Tony and didn't think of whether he would want to be or not. He didn't and went for me. Fair enough really but Lalitha and her husband were concerned. I assured them it was okay and my fault. It seems that Tony isn't used to many people. They wanted a photo of Tony so I took one of all of them to send them before we continued our walk up the beach.



We bumped into Elizabeth and a few of the fruit ladies from the other end of the beach. They complained that we hadn't been there and, not being brave enough to say we had been buying from just Lily, I just said we had been up the other end of the beach and it was a long walk. We made our escape quickly but they looked a little upset.

We arranged a taxi for tomorrow morning at 5am to take us to the airport and agreed a good price and then we headed back to the room to do more packing. We saw Hari and he told us about the temple procession that was going to happen later. We also paid him for the room, lest we not see him early in the morning before we left. We took photos in his garden and one of the other guests took a photo of Phil and I with Hari. Then Phil spent some time scraping the tropical wax off of his surfboard (if he'd left it till we were home the colder climate would have set it firmer and made it more difficult to remove). The wax he took off rolled into a ball and, after walking back to the beach, he gave this to Shaji for his board. We also said a final farewell to Lalitha and her husband before heading off to the German Bakery for some more Kashmiri tea. Unfortunately the waiter was



a bit perturbed that we were only having the tea so we decided to leave before we had it because of his attitude. It wasn't the first time they'd been like this which is a shame because it's good tea. Instead we went to Shiva's Moon for cardamom tea and Phil had a snack. We sat waiting for the procession to go along the beach but it seemed to be taking forever. We paid and went to sit on the beach to wait. By the time it arrived the failing light restricted filming opportunities. However we did manage to get some digital stills shots. There were drummers, a few dancers, some people dressed up as gods and lots of little girls dressed up in colourful costumes. As short as it lasted, it was definitely worth seeing.



We didn't follow the procession as we didn't want to intrude further and decided to walk back quietly along the beach. Near the temple we ran into Lalitha again who had just 'popped to the shop' (the shack on the corner!). She said it was a shame we were leaving, as she would like

to have asked us to her house for a cup of tea and even a meal. She said "next time you come" and once more we parted company with squeezed hands and a motherly hug from her ample frame.

Back at the room we did a little more packing before heading off for Lonely Planet for dinner. As ever the food was delicious (banana flower coconut fry is the tops!) and we over-indulged slightly but it was our last night and last chance to savor the delights of South Indian cuisine. Before we left we had a play with Sophie the 6-week-old puppy in the restaurant. She is clearly loved and cared for by the owner.

Then we walked along the beach to the other temple to see if anything was happening there in the way of celebrations but it was quiet. However the walk had been pleasant. We sat for a while on the beach watching the waves and also the lightning that flashed across the sky. There didn't appear to be any thunder though and there was no sign of rain.

We headed back to the noisy temple and to our room for a final pack up and wash-up. I washed my hair for only about the third time since I've been here! Then I sat writing the remaining words of my last day in Kovalam. Tomorrow it's up at 4.15am with the taxi arriving at 5am to take us to the airport. We will try a few hours sleep between the noises from the temple!

Thursday 11th April 2002

We got up okay at 4.15am. The temple next door was really quiet which is typical on the morning that we are up extra early and leaving! The taxi arrived promptly at 5am and off we drove to the airport, under the cover of darkness.

With the windows wound down we smelt the smells of India on the cool morning air; spices, fruit, etc – smells you only smell in India. We held hands all the way there, feeling sad at having to leave.

We had been told to arrive three hours before our 8.15am flight and had wondered why as it is normally only two hours before. On arrival all was made clear as we moved from one bureaucratic encrusted counter to another, standing in queues that inched along at a frustrating speed. The 'cogs' turn slowly in India. Several people tried to push in (queuing isn't a recognized thing at all in India) but with our frustration rubbing against the early hour, we sent them to the back.

Eventually.....eventually we will fly off and out over the golden sanded shores of India. Hopefully we will return soon.

Scooby

