

India –2008

In mid 2008 we began to talk with the “kids” about doing a full family outing one of these days. Although I’d never normally choose the Xmas Holiday break since that is high season almost everywhere and thus crowded and expensive, it was the most reasonable time for the 4 folks who work at honest jobs to take off, so the time frame was set. Next was to pick a spot. Many possibilities surfaced with Sabina pushing for Istanbul. A great city and area we’d be happy to go back to sometime, but not in the dead of winter. So, we ended up with South India as the choice. Dawna and I were there 7 years ago but we only saw a few places and could see a couple of new ones on this outing. Sabina and Russell had spent 3 (or so) months in India once but hadn’t gotten to South India; part of the reason for that choice. And they are very big on Indian food with Russell also being very good at cooking it. Nathan and Dannette had never been to India and were quite interested in doing so. So the die was cast and we began making plans. Not a trivial activity when 6 people are involved with distinctly different interests. Required some compromises by everyone on places to go, places to stay, dates, etc, etc; but it all worked out.

S&R expanded their outing by spending a few days in Europe on the way to India. They flew into Brussels and then Sabina went northward (Sweden I think) to tango for a weekend while Russell stayed in Brussels to sample the beer. N&D also had a stop on the way as they had planned to go to Dannette’s sister’s graduation in Florida so the starting date for the India outing was somewhat picked to enable them to “just” continue on to India. Meanwhile, we two did not plan any stops along the way.

Sunday-1: Eli took us to the SFO airport, arriving a couple of hours before our noon flight. Check-in went smoothly, with not having to weigh our bags after we had gone to a fair amount of effort to get them to the right weight back at home and to having a backup plan should our backpack carry-ons be declared too heavy. As is typical we checked one bag with lots of stuff to make life comfortable (like our pocket knives), but stuff we could live without if it got lost; and each of us had a backpack-suitcase carry-on with our real/needed stuff. The plane was full. I had a window and Dawna had an aisle, as are our choices; in different rows, but that’s OK. We were flying Cathay Pacific and I’d say the service was fine-good. But the seats were small/cramped and the people in front of me had their seats all the way back so I was extra cramped, plus my tray table was partially broken, and the personalized TV had a lousy picture. The plane was a 747 that had been refurbished not too long ago but was still not up to the class of most of the more recent models. The flight left nearly an hour late and had somewhat longer in-air time than normal due to the winds. All in all, we spent about 16 hours in that cramped plane. Who said getting there is half the fun; it ain’t. But we’re pretty good at it. Had a 3-hour layover in Hong Kong so no problem getting to our next “short” (darn near 6 hours actually!) flight to Bengaluru (Bangalore); where I’ll use the new names for Indian cities followed by the old names in parenthesis. Not many people on that flight, however, so although the seats were also small and cramped (don’t they realize the Asians are no longer small?) we were able to spread out with Dawna grabbing a 4 seat middle and totally stretching out

and I had our two seat area with a window recess so could stretch out pretty well too. Got better rest than on the first/longer flight.

Tuesday-1 (Monday was lost due to the International Date Line): Arrived Bengaluru a bit early. N&D were to arrive from Frankfurt a little before us but their plane was slightly delayed according to the information at the baggage area. After we got our checked bag we waited a few minutes for their plane to arrive, and it did. But they never got off it. We wondered what was up but had agreed earlier if anyone's flights got screwed up the others should just continue on. "On" in this case meant getting on a flight to Kochi(Cochin) in a few hours. When we initially booked our flights to India we all booked to land in Bengaluru. Later on 4 of we 6 decide to go onward to Kochi right away; so those tickets were separate from the main flights. Meant killing 3-4 hours in the airport from like 1:50 AM to 5:50 AM, but them's the breaks. After clearing customs I found a Lufthansa person and she was able (and willing) to look things up in the computer, and she said that N&D's plane was so late in leaving Orlando that they would miss the flight from Orlando to Bengaluru and were rebooked Frankfurt-Mumbai-Kochi; and would get there a couple hours later than we would. Was nice to know they weren't stranded in Frankfurt or Orlando or somewhere else. Well that was what the lady said and I typed this bit in near real time. Instead it turned out they couldn't make the newly defined King Fisher Airline plane in time at Mumbai and thus ended up having to get onto a different airline altogether (Spice Airline or something like that) and got to our Kochi hotel several hours after we did. Their whole experience was painful and stressful to say the least, but they did make it eventually.

Meanwhile back to our story line. Twas tiring waiting for 4 hours or so at that time of morning but a bit of coffee and some typing on this trip letter and pretty soon we were on our small Kingfisher airplane and down to Kochi we went. Arrived early, got our luggage, and took a taxi to the hotel (Hotel Arches) in the old/colonial/tourist part of town. A 45 km drive but it went pretty smoothly with our marveling at the congestion and smoke and haze and typical (in my opinion) Indian cityscape. Checked in and since it was too early to get into our room we left our luggage, walked over to the water (Arabian Sea/Indian Ocean), explored a bit along the shoreline, and then went back to the hotel and found the "kids" weren't there yet. Checked into our room. The AC in the room felt good. N&D eventually showed up and after they got a tiny bit settled we all had lunch at the hotel. Nothing special but it was convenient for folks who had been traveling a LONG time. Some unpacking, resting and then rather than go to bed at 5 PM, D and we two went "drinking." First to a place that had poor beer and even poorer wine and then to a nicer place that had good (and expensive) wine. Had a bit of a snack to go with it with we two sharing some quite good garlic squid rings. Finally some sleep stretched out on a real bed.

Wednesday-1: Breakfast at the hotel and it was quite nice/adequate (fruit, juice, eggs, toast, coffee). Off we four went to see the sights. Took a relatively long walk, checking out the sea front and everything along the way, over to the Mattancherry area, which is one of the two key sightseeing areas, the other being where we were staying (Fort Cochin). Did the Mattancherry Palace, also called the Dutch Palace because although it

was built by the Portuguese in 1555, the Dutch renovated it in 1663. It has some excellent old Hindu murals as well as various “typical” museum items of local attraction, and fine carved ceilings. Next was the Pardesi Synagogue in the adjacent Jew Town, where part of its attraction is the floor tiled with hand-painted tiles from China. It seems there are only 3 or so Jewish families left in Kochi now but at one time it was a haven for prosecuted Jews. Although basically no Jews are left, the area is still full of small shops; but no purchases were made by our gang or at least none that I remember. After hitting these two must-do attractions we took 3-wheelers (called put-puts or tut-tuts in some of our older trip letters but called auto rickshaws in India, so I’ll often refer to them simply as ARs) back to the hotel. A bit of cooling off and then to lunch at a spot a couple of blocks away.

The restaurant was on the top-floor balcony (some breeze and good view although smoggy as was all of India basically) and everyone had fine food. I had their most local fish, Dawna had shrimp, and both were in a house-specialty sauce. The kids had traditional thalis. More local area walking, during which we signed up for a back-water tour the next day. Getting out on the backwater has become a big tourist item in that part of the country with many folks going for a few days in a houseboat like affair that is a converted rice boat; we were just going for a day tour. More cooling off in our hotel rooms and then off we went to see a Kathakali performance. Kathakali is a traditional art form of this (Kerala) area and Kochi is THE place to see a performance. Kathakali comes from “katha”, which means “story” and “kali”, which means “play.” I called it Indian Kabuki. There are three actors or so and music by a group of 4-5 musicians. A highlight of the evening is to go an hour early (like at 5 PM) and watch them getting their elaborate makeup put on. Amazing, as they do almost all of it to themselves using a hand mirror; and the end result is spectacular. We then received some education about the whole phenomena including watching one of the actors demonstrate superb eye movements and facial expressions while the orator told us what was going on. Pretty unbelievable facial control. Then the couple of hour show/story; this is the tourist version, the real version goes on all night. VERY enjoyable outing. After the performance we had dinner at a place where one sits in a courtyard garden. Very nice meal with Dawna having crab au gratin and I had a pork curry cooked Kerala-Portuguese syle. Quite a successful day all in all. And a good night’s sleep was welcomed.

As an aside, our Star-one ATM card didn’t work in Bangalore and then also not in Kochi, but the Washington Mutual one did. D&N’s worked but they are (I think) Debit Cards as well as ATM cards (or something like that). Sabina’s worked the first time she tried it but didn’t work when she and M tried each of theirs. But as long as our WM one worked all was well. Turns out that after we got home, M’s card didn’t work in the local Star One ATM machine either so they replaced them with new ones. Henceforth we should check them out before hitting the road/plane! While I’m on asides, I should note that it was hot and humid and humid and humid! And this is about the coolest time of the year and not the Monsoon season. I guess being <10 degrees from the equator things don’t ever actually cool off.

Thursday-1: Another breakfast and ready for our pick-up at 8 AM. The van picked us up first and then picked up 3 or so other groups from far and near so it took a fair while but eventually we were on our way out of town (going southeast). Lots of traffic with a combination of vans, trucks, motorcycles, ARs, bicycles, walkers, and the occasional animal. Rather on the wild side to say the least. Got to where we'd board our boat and met up with another tour group, so the 16 or so of us got on a converted rice boat and saw the countryside. Many many fishermen; fresh water mussel shells in huge piles both on boats and on land (post removing the mussels), scenic to say the least. Workers removing sand from the river/canal bottom and manually loading it into and out of boats to go elsewhere. Stopped at a spot that used to process mussels, walked around the village a bit, was given a short lecture on holistic flora and saw lots of samples growing there, bought some steamed mussels whose meat was mixed with spices; tiny pieces of meat like baby clams. They were excellent. Also bought some chips and a sweet drink (made from the flowers/sap and turns to beer after sitting/fermenting awhile I think) while at the/a village. Dawna and an Indian couple (Dr and wife with arthritis) became good friends during the outing. All sort of typical for a day tour and quite interesting. When the boat got back to our starting point we had lunch (thalis that were quite good) on board. We then got back into the van and went 8 km further and boarded canoes (about 6 people and 3 canoes) that had expert pole poking chaps doing the propelling effort. Amazingly good at steering as we were now in a small river/canal. Made a couple of stops. The one where women were making rope from coconut husks/threads was really neat. The one where they were climbing trees to get coconuts and passing them around to eat and drink was nothing great.

Eventually we were back in the van and driving back to Kochi. By now traffic was even heavier and we had a more "flashy" driver and we sure thought we were going to crash several times, but we didn't. We were the second set of people to be let off so didn't have to go all over everywhere this time. Rest, clean, cool off, and then had dinner at a rather upscale place. Turned out it didn't open until 7 so we had a round of drinks in the bar first. My seafood lasagna was weird and OK but not great. D had a crab-avocado salad. We had had a good-sized lunch plus lots of excellent mussels earlier so certainly were not hungry.

Friday-1: Checked prices at a couple of places and then reserved a car and driver for the following day agreeing on spots to see on the way to Madurai (only 280 km but a 7-8 hour drive so tried to make it into an interesting day outing not just a get-to-Madurai deal. Walked various new streets, hot of course. Did Santa Cruz Basilica and St. Francis Church; two of the big three attractions in the immediate area, the others being the Chinese Fishing Nets that we saw each time we went to the seaside and also when we were on the boat trip. They are quite the contraptions and sort of the logo for the area. Had lunch at our prior place but poorer service than before, no thalis were available and that was why we mainly had gone there, and the other food was less good as well. When walking around a fellow pulled up on a motorcycle and gave us a flyer for a music performance that would be at the same location as the K had been; and the fellow was one of the people from the prior night. We all said sure. The key instrument was like a

Sitar with a big gourd at the far end. Another fun evening performance. I think the drummer was most outstanding but everyone in the small group was excellent.

As another aside, folks actually did some shopping with D getting a couple of outfits, N buying a couple of pair of light weight slacks (that shrunk so much upon washing that I'm not sure he ever wore them), and M having some clothes made that were copies of an outfit she wears for traveling a lot; plus maybe getting a local looking outfit or two. So, the group, including Sabina later on but never including me, looked localish in terms of clothes but nothing else. And, I think the locals appreciated our attempts at dressing in this manner. While I'm in an "aside" paragraph, they had wireless Internet in the hotel but the signal was weak in our room so when I wanted to use it I'd go sit next to the door where it was just barely strong enough. Unfortunately, that meant being out of the main AC area and usually when we retreated to the room it was partially for the AC. In Madurai, to get ahead of myself, the wireless worked fine and in Chennai (way ahead of myself) it worked fine but they charged you for it so I didn't use it nearly as routinely.

Saturday-1: Driver showed up on time, with a Toyota SUV like we had agreed upon. No problem fitting the luggage in and off we went. Nathan was in the front while the other 3 of us were in the second seat. Tight but not terrible. Headed out of town and the traffic wasn't as bad as I had expected for near rush hour, but then I remembered it was Saturday. Rather warm in the car so we asked him to turn on the A/C and learned that he thought we had rented a non-A/C car. Phone calls followed by both him and Nathan and it was agreed we had procured an A/C car. I thought we'd have to go change to a different car but that for the 8-hour or so trip it would be worth losing an hour to do so. But no, he just hit the A/C button. Guess when you rent a car without A/C it doesn't necessarily mean the car doesn't have it, just that you don't get it and maybe the bigger ones like we rented all have it. Next "event" was when he pulled into a gas station and filled up and asked for 2,000 ruppies (~\$40). Actually I was in the bathroom at that time and Dannette paid him. We soon, however, confirmed that gas was included in our bottom line cost (8,000 Rps) so this would come off the bill when we paid at the end of the trip (hopefully at least). Footnote: it did as did even the tolls we had paid and there was no quibble over the bill when we paid it in Madurai. A nice situation as on our prior visit to India we ended up in a major quibble. The lesson here is to get everything agreed to before starting off on a car+driver outing.

Southward we went into backwater country, sort of like for our backwater outing. Then eastward through the heart of the area where they rent "houseboats" that are converted rice barges and written up in all the literature. Fun looking crafts but not sure I'd go for spending more than a day on one of them. Surprising (to me) number of regular resorts on the lakes and canals as we drove by. Also always a lot of action on the road in terms of motorcycles, bicycles, ox-pulled wagons, cars, and millions (seemed like) of buses of all types. Always interesting to watch the driver handle all this. Once out of backwater country one climbs up some hills/mountains on a twisty road. We were beginning to see why it takes 8 hours to go less than 300 km. We passed on stopping at a couple of the previously marked spots (tea plantation and tea company) but did make a couple of simple roadside stops that were quite interesting. One was where there was a forest of

rubber trees and each had like a barber pole cut in them down which sap was draining into a bucket at the bottom. This then gets put into forms and we got to see and touch some of the rubber/latex-like bars.

There were tea plantations in super terraces, irrigated, cut short, picturesque, with some picking going on. Had lunch at a spot near the top of our drive and it was actually quite good. Went to the Nat'l park that is there and is super popular with the locals but you can't really do much there (like a hike) on your own. It seems everyone does the boat trip on a man-made lake or takes a guided walk. The latter is only early in the AM and the former would mean waiting an hour and maybe was already sold out as the park was packed since this was a weekend. So we ended up not going into the park at all (can't just go in and do a quick drive around without paying a fair amount and there is nowhere to really drive except to the artificial lake). Down the other side of the Hill Country we went. It was steeper than coming up and did not have tea plantations. You get down to like 1,000 ft rather than to sea level (where we had started from). Nice valley between mountains and lots of farming. Rice and coconut are the biggies along with some sugar cane. Stopped to stretch near a small brick factory; really more of a farm that made sun-dried bricks. Very picturesque and while we were there a AR filled with school girls pulled up to let one girl off. We waved and the AR backed up so that all the girls could talk with us; resulting in Dawna giving them stickers, everyone taking pictures, lots of grinning, etc, etc. Neat happenstance.

It was just getting dark as we got to town. Had been 10 hours WITHOUT any major stops so who knows when we would have gotten there if we had made several of the potential stops. Was nice to have done basically all of the trip in daylight so that we could see the countryside. Took some effort to find the hotel but we did and they had us in their records and we checked-in. Cleaned a bit and went for dinner in the hotel dining room but the only option was a full buffet, which some of us were not up to. However, Dannette found the bar and reported it had some snacks so to it we went. It was a good fit to our desires and we relaxed there over drinks (beer and wine) and snacks. As we were leaving the bar, S&R were at the checkin counter. They stashed their bags in their room and then we all went back to bar; snacks for them and more drinks for us. A bath (yes there was a bathtub) and to bed.

Sunday-2: There was an extensive breakfast buffet, both Indian and Western. After that we all went to the primary thing to see in Madurai - Sri Meenakshi Temple. It gets like 10,000 visitors (almost all are pilgrims) daily and is a huge place. Quoting from LP "riotously baroque example of Dravidian architecture with gopurams covered from top to bottom in a breathtaking profusion of multicoloured images of gods, goddesses, animals and mythical figures." The gopurams are basically towers and about 150 feet tall. BUT they were all being refurbished and thus covered with palm matting so we could hardly see anything. Disappointing. The interior was still quite impressive both in terms of structures and statues and masses of people, and included a museum and a large pond. There were huge queues to get into some of the temple rooms but those rooms were only for Hindu folks so we didn't get to stand in a line for hours. We walked around all of the interior (in bare feet by the way as not only weren't shoes allowed but neither were

socks) and then left. Originally we had thought we'd do part of the temple in the AM and part in the evening (it closes from like 12:30 PM to 4 PM) but there was no need of a second visit. After that we walked the old part of town/city checking things out here and there. Eventually we went to a very non-fancy place for lunch as it had been written up in all the books as being really authentic. Thalys were the item of choice and we all had them. When we first got there (about 11:30 AM) it was empty and we questioned our choice but by the time the temple had closed it was packed to the brim with people waiting for you to finish so they could have your seat at one of the long tables. The proprietors were very friendly to we strange white folk, the food was good, and the experience was even better. A fun find. Seems like after lunch we did some more walking looking for different items, in particular for a couple of book stores that turned out to be closed. Then the usual cool down and clean up and off to dinner at a roof top restaurant (Emperor) that was also in the books. Very poor is about all I can say for it.

Monday-2: Bfast of course and then all but Sabina went to the Tirumalai Nayak Palace ("this Indo-Saracenic palace was built in 1636" and was "regarded as one of the finest secular building in South India"), which according to the guide books is hardly worth a visit now as it has decayed so much. With that in mind we expected basically ruins. Instead it was an excellent place with an enormous amount of reconstruction going on, lots to see both reconstructed and old, no crowds, workers on fantastic bamboo scaffolding, and more. Thoroughly enjoyable; so it never hurts to give things a try. Back to the hotel, joined up with Sabina, back to town to our "dumpy" eating place. Greeted happily by the proprietors and had another fun meal; this time ordering different dishes, mainly dosas, rather than having the thalis. After that, N&D went (via an AR) to the Gandhi Memorial Museum and the Government Museum. The other 4 of us walked to the fruit and vegetable market and bummed around there a bit although it was beginning to close down. Had a quite fun encounter with some chaps who were dealing in banana leaves. Even took their picture with S&R, and mailed it to them after we got back to California. We then continued walking, across a river, and eventually got to the Gandhi Museum. M&S took an AR back to the hotel, stopping for some more shopping/looking in the old town and getting some good food from a stand near a bus station. R&I did the museum, which was quite decent and certainly made me feel that the movie *Gandhi* that we had watched a few weeks earlier portrayed things quite well. We then also took an AR to the hotel, did the usual cleanup, had a drink or two, and then went to dinner at the most upscale hotel (on the outskirts of town). Not great eating unfortunately. The hotel is quite isolated atop a hill with nice grounds all around it but we were glad we hadn't ended up staying there. The hotel we were at was a standard business man's hotel at the edge of town as the ones near the temple sounded extremely basic (mainly for the pilgrims).

Tuesday-2: Bfast and then to the train station with our luggage tied down on the top of a 3-seat SUV; only a few kms. Underwent some fumbling concerning what lines we needed to get in to obtain paper tickets as we (Sabina really) had made our reservations over the Internet. Turned out, one doesn't need, or get, anything else but boards the train and shows the conductor the electronic booking. The train was about a half hour late arriving and spent more than its prescribed time at the station but neither of these is unusual and

soon we were in our compartment and rolling northward. Watched the countryside out pretty dirty windows, did some reading, did some typing, ate various snacks (like the lunch we bought from a vendor), tracked the route on a map that I had as well as on my GPS, etc. Both Nathan and Russell even got in some sleep (or close to it). Pretty relaxed day. At times we were going as rapid as 60 mph but when combined with slower times and stops we average less than 30. Did get to Chennai(Madras) only about 30 minutes late so not bad at all. Grubby train station and lots of people and we ended up in an outside area where there were no real taxis but rather a few ARs who tried to convince us to use them to get to our hotel but (a) we didn't think we'd fit and (b) we didn't think they really knew where to go. So, walked back over to the main train station area expecting a real taxi stand. No such thing and the taxis we did see seemed uninterested in us. Eventually got convinced by a couple of AR guys that we and our luggage could fit and that they knew where we wanted to go so we jammed everything into it and off we went.

They got us to a hotel and while I was seeing if this was the right place they unloaded everything. It wasn't the right place. Phone calls eventually determined where we were supposed to be, got all reloaded and went the several blocks to the right place. At this juncture they wanted more money than had been agreed to due to the extra efforts and we felt a deal is a deal and the extra effort cost us extra time and was their fault, so we refused. Bickering continued but they finally figured out they best take what had been agreed to (and was overpriced actually) and off they went. Our new place was clean but Spartan and certainly not what the literature had indicated since we thought we were getting a three bedroom apartment with a common area and a kitchen. Instead we got three separate rooms and there was a table out in a non A/C common area on the same floor and a kitchen downstairs that I guess one could use if one really wanted to. Besides being Spartan the bathroom was one of those where the shower gets everything wet and it stays wet until it goes down the drain in the floor; not very convenient to say the least. But the A/C did work and the bed was fine; little other furniture in the room, however. I had been a bit worried about the place given the lowish cost but the writeup sounded so good. We were tired and hungry and it was late but the proprietor told us of a place we could eat nearby and one of the chaps walked us over there. They were just closing but agreed to serve us and we had a fine meal in this "common" place. M&I had meat (chicken and mutton and the mutton was quite good) curry. Back we walked and into bed.

Wednesday-2: Bfast was an omlette with toast. Meanwhile D&N had reserved a higher class hotel for the rest of their Chennai time. This would mean splitting up, which was anti the whole concept so we had various discussions and finally settled on a place less high-class than what they had reserved but significantly more high class than where we presently were; basically another Indian businessman's hotel. We felt bad bailing out on our hosts, but such is the world of compromising with 3 different couples; really 6 different people. We piled into a big taxi and went to our new accommodations, the drive going by the area and hotel we had stayed in 7 years ago. It was fun to see old landmarks. Checked in, unpacked a bit, and then went to lunch. The spot was one of the 25 or so Saravana Bhavan restaurants in Chennai. S&R like the one in NYC and wanted to see

what the original/real ones were like. As it turned out, we ate at a variety of them (hereafter referred to as SB) over the next few days. All were quite good and inexpensive, ranging from ridiculously low to low with the difference being whether it was A/C or not and the class of the tables and dinnerware. And they were all good; even for a non-vegetarian person like me. Don't recall what we did for the rest of the afternoon; but it certainly was hot and muggy. Perhaps this was when we went to a huge bookstore and R bought several (small and specialized) cook books; or maybe that was in Madurai?

That night N&D and M&I went to a performance in a quite nice venue very near the hotel. It was part of a million (maybe not quite) such performances going on for 6 weeks or so (the 58th, or was it 48th, annual Tamil Music and Dance Festival) and we had planned to hit some of them. This evenings was mainly vocal with some instruments. It started at 7 PM and we thought it would last an hour or hour and a half but turned out to go more than 2 hours. About 8:30 M&I left because we had told S&R we'd go to a sort of late dinner with them. They were in the bar at the hotel having a drink and we 4 then took an AR to another SB, this one (on Peter's Road) being the most upscale one we went to. Quite nice and quite good. Walked home from there as it was not very far away and those kids are walkers, as are we.

I guess earlier this day, or was it the next, we went to a major bookstore but they didn't have much new in the way of cookbooks for R to procure. There was an interesting encounter there, however, when a lady basically accused R of being rude or something like that and thus she assumed he was from NYC. Turns out she had worked in a bookstore in NYC for a decade or so. They got talking and she became a friend what with giving us different restaurant hints and things such as that.

Thursday-2 (Christmas): Bfast buffet with both Indian and "regular" stuff. We all headed over to an area that had a couple of state-sanctioned folkart place but both were closed (as it was Xmas). We then set out to find a musical instrument store that Nathan had discovered via the Internet. Took a fair amount of hunting and asking but eventually found it and it was open. Probably a good hour was spent there with N&D interacting with the salespersons. Eventually two major purchases were made (a Mridangam, which is a two sided drum, and a Harmonium, which is a pump keyboard instrument) as were some minor smaller percussion items. After careful packing of these gems, N&D went back to the hotel while the other 4 of us continued walking north and east toward the older part of the city, Georgetown. Crossed the river a time or two, walked through a shanty town, saw the entire shanty town from atop a bridge, walked around Georgetown a bit, and then took an AR back to the hotel. The route back went along the coast (Bay of Bengal) enabling the kids to see the enormous beach that is there as well as some other sights. For us it was fun because we had walked along a couple miles of that beach the last time we were here, so saw familiar landmarks.

One Festival performance that night was dancing and all six of us went to it. The facility wasn't as nice as the one the day before but it was still quite reasonable and again we could just walk to it. The dancing reminded us of the recital we had gone to a month or two earlier in our area when a neighborhood girl was performing. Of course these people

were older and more professional. After the performance the gang split up, with M&I going to the hotel and to bed, and the two sets of kids going to different restaurants.

As an aside, I've not mentioned how dry Chennai is. There are (rather expensive) bars in the higher-class hotels but basically nowhere else, and a few small "Wine shops" that sell a tiny bit of alcohol. These shops are few and far between and small and have a semi criminal atmosphere to them. Sabina bought some whisky a couple of time and it wasn't all that bad considering the price, and Nathan bought either gin or vodka once. I had pre-mixed manhattans (from home) with me so didn't procure anything. Oh, yes, R bought an occasional (and usually poor) beer at these places.

Friday – N&D&M went back to craft places (folk art really) and D especially made purchases for gifts to distribute back home. S&R&I walked to the Pondy Bazaar, a fair distance but always enjoyable to see what's going on along the way. Once there it is a crowded place of stores, stands, and lots of people; an amazing lot of people and even our New Yorkers were impressed with the "mob." Checked out things at a couple of places spending the most time at a place that sells cooking equipment; and lots of it. Looked for a SB restaurant that is in the area but couldn't find it so took a AR to the one on Peter's street and had lunch there. Boy did the cold water and the A/C taste/feel good. Actually had to wait 15 minutes or so to get a table even though it was in the middle of the afternoon. They all do an amazing amount of business and seem full basically any time of day. Back to the hotel, and a bit later we all went to the Kapaleeshwarar Temple. Much smaller than the one in Madurai but the gopurams were uncovered and very enjoyable to look at. The Sun was setting low in the sky since we were showing up when it opened at 4 PM and this gave it fine lighting. Quite enjoyable. From there it was a short walk to the Ramakrishna Mutt Temple, which was Buddhist-like, and also easy to see and enjoyable. N&D&I then took an AR back to the hotel while the other 3 walked back with a goal of seeing some particular food cooking stands along the way; which they both saw and sampled. We then went to our third performance in a row, this one being instrumental and at the less great spot of the two already discussed. Fine performance, basically like jazz in terms of improvising. We left a bit before it ended as had agreed on a time to leave in order to go to dinner. Another SB that said it had A/C and was a speciality spot (like the Peter's street one). It turned out to not be quite up to the Peter's street class but definitely fine and good.

Also on Friday, we had spent some time talking to a chap at the travel desk at the hotel. Not an overly knowledgeable fellow in my opinion but we did get information as to what sort of outing we might do in a car with driver for our days after all the kids were gone. Two of the main 3-4 places away from Chennai that he suggested you go to we had been to on our prior trip, but they were still of interest since we had enjoyed them previously. The other couple, a bird sanctuary (Vedantangal) and the town of Puducherry (Pondicherry) would be new. The latter was a French colonial spot long ago so is supposed to be an interesting mixture of Indian and French now days. Figured we might stay there two nights if we went off on such an outing. However, we weren't very gung-ho and also considered just coming home early if that would work out with the airline in a reasonable manner. Our motivation for this was two (or three fold): (a) the theme of the

trip was doing things with the kids and the kids would be gone, (b) Chick Lagel appeared to be dieing in California and we might be able to help Helen out, and (c) hot and humid India had its drawbacks and we certainly didn't want more days in Chennai. When we initially scheduled our return a few days after the kids we had planned to use those days to go to Kochi, as the plan had been to go to Hampi while S&R were in Bengalura; but then Kochi got exchanged for Hampi so we'd been there. To now go to Hampi would mean a very long and semi-complicated train rides that just didn't seem worth it.

Saturday-2: Decided to dedicate the morning to sorting out plans for the rest of the trip, which meant I missed out on going to the National Museum with N&D but we felt we had to get things sorted out. The first step was to see if flying home early was practical or not. We had many phone numbers for Cathay Pacific airline but none of them worked although a human answered one once. The chap at the travel desk tried as well but didn't really do any better. Eventually decided to take an AR to an actual office to see if it was open (the travel guy thought it was open from 10 AM to noon on Saturday. Yes, a lady was at the desk and she turned out to be super efficient! We could change our return flights for no extra fee, but when we said we'd like to go on Monday (3 AM) since that was about when S&R were leaving the country, it turned out that was the one day of the week they didn't fly. So, we picked Sunday (i.e., this evening really) rather than Tuesday as by now we were quite interested in getting back to see/help Helen and Chick. Went back to the hotel and told everyone, including the hotel keeper, our plans. Then we and S&R headed back to Pondy Bazaar (by two Rs) to show M the busy area and for Russell to buy a couple of cooking items (a tava or tawa that is a basically a heavy skillet used for cooking breads, dosai, utthapam and such and a stovetop gas tandoor that emulates the intense (900F) heat from a real clay tandoor so is sued for grilled/tikka dishes). R was successful in making these purchases and figuring out how to get them home as part of their luggage and M also bought an item (basically a stainless steel roaster pan). Had lunch in the area at yet another SB (actually the one we couldn't find on the prior day).

Went back to the hotel, settled the bills for we three (which made it a bit complicated since we were all leaving at different times), arranged a taxi to the airport for 11 PM (plane was 3:15 AM), packed, took a nap (well, at least a rest), and then to the airport we went. Lots of traffic for this time of night but rolled along well. The only real traffic jam was at the airport itself where we eventually just got out and walked the last little bit. Ugly, warm, old, crowded airport but we had plenty of time to get through the various lines. Also, earlier I had done an on-line checkin and that helped us avoid some of the lines. While waiting around we called Dick Weaver and confirmed that he had gotten an e-mail I had sent earlier and was able to pick us up these couple of days earlier than planned. Plane left on time, we had a pair of seats on one side of 2x3x2 seating. Arrived Hong Kong a bit ahead of schedule. Nice airport, free WiFi, large waiting areas. Had an expensive coffee, did some typing, and eventually caught our plane to SFO. They didn't load by rows but rather a very long queue formed and we were pretty far back in it. When we finally got to where one hands folks our boarding pass she took it and gave us back ones for business class. What the heck is this about we wondered but we didn't say NO! The next 11.5 hours were highly serviced to say the least what with plenty of food, booze, attention, movies, music with nice headphones etc; including the ability to stretch

fully out for resting. Arrived SFO, cleared customs efficiently (getting off the airplane first doesn't hurt), got our shipped bag, Dick was there, and pretty soon we were back in Cupertino going through mail, unpacking, washing clothes, washing ourselves, and stuff like that. Very nice to see clear air! In fact we all made that comment, indicative of how dirty/smoggy India had been although it didn't really deter us from our activities.

Summary: A successful trip. Our prime goal was to do a full family thing and that was accomplished, and both enjoyable and interesting. Performances, eating, and general "exploring" were the highlights in contrast with prior trips where we've hit major temples, statues, forts, and "spots" like that. Don't imagine we'll be back to India again but one never knows; like if there were to be some event that made it worth going. The airplane rides were long but the business-class return was a nice twist. Also, we two had it easy re no cancelled flights or such while S&R had some pain and D&N had enormous pain. Chick did die and we were glad to have come back a few days earlier than planned.