

My India trip Jan 21-Feb 6

It started with a fairly casual mentioning of my interest to visit India someday. About half of our product team at Oracle is working in the India Development Center (IDC) in Bangalore. I mentioned my interest to one of my VP's at one of our meetings, and just a few weeks later, my manager started putting together a plan for me to visit IDC and present some of our investigations related to the next release of our product. I had been thinking about visiting India for several years, and this seemed to be a great opportunity. After working with a mostly Indian team for many years I figured it would be appropriate and would broaden my perspective on my coworkers and our cultural differences. Several of my coworkers visited a few months ago, and after that, several members from the India team came out to work here in CA. It was good to start building relationships between the two teams, especially with the success of our product depending on contributions from both teams.



Palace in Mysore – one of the beautiful sights in India

Soon afterward I found out another coworker was also planning on visiting India in the next couple months. It would make sense to visit at the same time, and we actually ended up being able to take the same flight to Bangalore. I had been a bit worried for a while about the logistics and what I would need, but soon all the logistics started falling into place – getting the plane tickets, visas, and hotel reservations. The toughest part was getting all the projects ready to present to the team in Bangalore. I wanted to maximize my time there by preparing a set of workshops and presentations for the team. I sometimes felt completely overwhelmed – that it would be impossible to get all the projects done, and that it wouldn't make sense for me to visit – besides, we could always do conference calls and post presentations online. That would later prove to fall far short – my presence proved to be quite valuable for the team.

Jan 21

Everything was finally set to go – my luggage was packed, I finally had the projects ready to present, and I had my laptop ready to run the presentations. I was still a bit nervous about going and was still wondering if I had missed something. My coworker Srinivas was a great help – since he grew up in Bangalore, he knew pretty much all that was going on. He even took us out for south Indian food in San Mateo a couple nights ago as if to prepare us for the culinary pleasures there.

I started learning a lot about Indian culture even before we left – seeing in a very real sense the bond of community in the culture – one of Srinivas's neighbors was celebrating a birthday party and Srinivas invited me to hang out a little. His apartment seemed to have a little sub-community of Indian people who all knew each other.

We were all ready to go – our former coworker Arvind came by to pick us up and take us to the airport – I think we had 8 bags between us – 2 checked bags and 2 carryons each (I took one of Srinivas's checked bags since he had 3 and I had 1). Our flight for Singapore took off around midnight. We were just lining up to get on the plane, and Srinivas met a friend from 8 years ago in the airport – they knew each other from India! And they both recognized each other as if they saw each other yesterday!

Jan 22-23

Singapore Airlines knew how to treat people right – offering an almost unlimited selection of movies (decent ones too), and plenty of good food. It was a long flight as we crossed the date line and our great circle route took us above the Arctic Circle. I didn't realize how far north we were until I looked outside and saw endless fields of glaciers and icebergs (the map on channel 98 confirmed it too). In just a few hours we'd be in Singapore where it was about 85 degrees F!

A brief stopover in Hong Kong to refuel and we were on our way. However, there was so much security that in order to get off the plane and back on, it seemed like we needed to go around the whole airport to get back to our gate. It was nice to walk around though, since we had been sitting for the last 12 hours or so.

A few hours later and we were in Singapore – with its modern skyline, white sand beaches, and rainforest. We only had a few hours – not enough to explore around outside, but there was plenty to do in the airport! The airport was complete with great shopping malls, gardens, waterfalls, plasma TV lounges, gym, showers, and beds (though you had to pay several dollars for each half hour of sleep!)

It was a long flight so far, and we still had a few hours to get to Bangalore. It went by quickly enough, and soon we were touching down. From the air, Bangalore seemed like an endless sea of lights – much bigger than San Jose. Bangalore is the Silicon Valley of India – over the next couple weeks, I would see almost as many high tech companies as in the Bay Area!

We finished collecting our luggage in the Bangalore airport, went through immigration and customs, and we were on our way. We were welcomed to India with red roses and great hospitality. I got to meet Srinivas's parents and wife and one of his uncles as we headed outside – I wanted to stay and chat, but Srinivas was going back to his parents' place while I was heading to my hotel. We parted ways for the evening as the taxi sped away.

First thing I noticed with the driving – the horn was as important as the steering wheel, the brake was optional, and lanes/traffic signs were merely suggestions. We headed down the left side of the street – one of the results of the centuries of British colonization of India – careening around the countless motorcycles, autorickshaws, and bicycles. After emerging through some narrow streets and alleys we ended up on a big road, which was MG road, named after Mahatma Gandhi. The Taj Residency came up just around the corner.

The hotel seemed like a palace – marble floors, expansive halls, and great food and service. It was about the same price as some decent American hotels – expensive compared to US standards, and especially expensive for Indian standards! I was finally in my room, getting unpacked and relaxing on my king-sized bed in front of the plasma TV – the first time I had seen a bed in probably about 40 hours.

Jan 24

This was my first workday – time to start getting the presentations and workshops ready. I enjoyed a rather nice international hotel breakfast buffet before heading over to catch my 8:00 taxi ride. I had explored several options as to the best way to get to the office.

The hotel taxi was a bit expensive – Rs 500 each way (about \$12). Srinivas called another taxi and they would do it for Rs 100 – shows how easy it was to get ripped off. (Later I found I could hire an autorickshaw for Rs 30 for the same distance!) It was the usual hectic chaos on the streets as we wound our way over to the Oracle office. Again, stop signs were merely suggestions, traffic lights were rare, and if there was no traffic coming the opposite direction, we were free to take up all lanes of the road!

It was readily apparent how the different classes of people lived – right next to some nice apartment buildings were other smaller houses and even a bunch of tents where people lived. Some people were selling jars and pots out of some pretty worn looking canvas tents. There were markets all along the streets – people selling clothes, shoes, carvings, and fruits and vegetables. There were plenty of tea stands too – a cup of tasty chai tea would typically run about Rs 5 (about 12 cents).



I reached the office around 8:15 – traffic wasn't as bad as I thought it might be. After finding out which building I should be in, I checked with security and just as soon as I signed in, I met Hitesh – one of our team members. A few moments later, Srinivas came in, and I met Pradeep and Krish – they had visited HQ a few months ago. I met the rest of the team shortly afterward – they typically came into the office around 10:00. Sarah, Kartikeyan, Harish, Ashley, and Krithi were also working on our team.

They had a space already prepared for Srinivas and me – I started finding my way around and getting my laptop set up. Time to test out the power adaptor... I turned on the laptop and it seemed to be working ok. However, the screen would flicker every couple seconds – I put up with it for a while, but I soon realized the battery wasn't getting charged – in fact, it was constantly switching to and from the battery... the adaptor wasn't able to handle the load for the laptop very well. Fortunately they were able to provide another one, and we were soon in business.

I had just eaten breakfast at the hotel, but it was customary to take breakfast at work before starting the day. We had a bunch of extra meal coupons – each good for Rs 10, enough to cover breakfast or lunch. We were watching Agassi play in the Australian Open while sipping chai tea and eating idly and vada for breakfast – traditional south Indian dishes.

I had my laptop ready and started catching up on email and getting the projects ready for the week. Fortunately with everything running online, getting things to work in Bangalore wasn't really any different from running them in CA (except you had to be a bit patient sometimes). I had the presentations and workshops ready to go for the next five days – so far everything was running smoothly, now that I got the power working for my laptop. The only hitch was that my laptop didn't have a full battery where you could run it without power for a couple hours. It only had a very small battery, which only lasted about 4-5 minutes, just long enough to save your work and shut down gracefully if you lost power. This hindered progress a couple times throughout the week, especially since the power plug was a bit loose and would easily come disconnected from the adaptor, resulting in the laptop silently switching to battery mode, and dying 4-5 minutes later!

The presentation went well the first day and the team members were eager to learn about a new area of our product that we were uptaking. It was interesting to be working in the IDC building that seemed so similar to our buildings in CA, but the moment you stepped outside and see the traffic and chaos outside, you quickly realized you're not in CA anymore. Most people had desktops with flat-screen monitors (even nicer than what we have in the US!), and the office didn't really have cubicles – people were arranged in a communal layout.

We enjoyed lunch at the cafeteria – again free with our coupons (but even if we had to pay for it, it was only Rs 10 – about 20 cents). Again, it was traditional south Indian food eaten with your hand – dosas, vada with chutney and sambar, and idly. I chose a Thums Up soda over the tap water – I didn't want to risk any sickness early in the trip. After

visiting the hand wash after lunch, we were back to work. The afternoon was more of a workshop style format and people were trying out some stuff for themselves. Between 5 and 6 PM, it was customary to go up to the terrace on the roof of the building and take tea and a light supper. It was cool to hang out with the rest of the team while watching the sun filter its way through the cumulus clouds into a brilliant red tropical sunset.

I was mostly running on my second wind – since by 6 PM in Bangalore, it would have been about 4:30 in the morning in CA. But it was important to make it to at least 9:00 so I could get my body clock readjusted. I seemed to be doing fine – maybe I was just running on adrenaline through the presentations and workshops. I'm sure the frequent cups of tea every couple hours also probably helped.

I was thinking about just heading back to the hotel to rest, but Hitesh, enjoying a few months of bachelorhood (his wife was up in Gujarat with family for a few months) wanted to hang out a bit after work. I locked up my laptop and we headed out – I was a little nervous when he pulled out his motorcycle and said let's go, but before I had much time to think about it, we were off. Weaving through rush hour in the busy streets of Bangalore was a bit of an adventure, though a lot more efficient than taking a car or autorickshaw.

We stopped at one of the Hutch shops (there was one almost on every block), and I got a new SIM card for my cell phone – for about Rs 500, I had enough minutes to last me most of my stay in India. It was much easier than I had thought – I rang up Srinivas to say hi (he had just gotten his cell phone working too). It was fun to ring people just to say hi – I guess that's also part of the communal nature of Indian culture, in America people are so much more individualistic, making their own decisions. I think I learned a lot about American culture by being in a different culture and looking back at things Americans took for granted that Indians do not.

We visited MG road and hung out a little at some of the shops. One of the famous shops was the Cauvery – featuring traditional Indian handicrafts with sandalwood carvings, silk rugs, teak carvings, marble replicas of the Taj Mahal, and amazingly ornate inlaid wood tables. Many of the most intricate works were of various Hindu gods or certain Hindu festivals. Many of the people were very religious and valued highly the icons representing their gods. One statue of Shiva – about 2 m tall, was selling for over Rs 2 lakh, about \$5000 (possibly a year's wages). The shop seemed more like a museum and I was just in awe of the detailed handicrafts.



A couple shops down was a silk shop specializing in rugs – more rugs that you could count of all different sizes. The owner took great pride in the elaborate patterns woven in the fine rugs. At first I had little interest in a rug, thinking it would be too expensive or a rip-off, but after seeing how the silk sheened in the light and inspecting the stitching, it was clear they were authentic. In fact, supposedly it takes 4 months to make a rug about a square meter. I ended up walking away with a 2.5' by 4' rug for Rs 10000 (about \$200). Though the rug was obviously designed to be walked on, it was such a masterpiece of a tapestry that it deserved to be hung on the wall when I got home! We stopped for tea after shopping and hung out until about 10:30 (I was still doing fine, though a bit sleepy), and he dropped me back at the Taj a couple blocks away. After applying a couple drops of Ylang Ylang oil (which I had gotten in Singapore), I was quickly off to sleep.

Jan 25

My trusty alarm went off at 7:00 and I lazily swung over to stop the beeping racket as the cobwebs started clearing in my head. I wasn't sure what time it was – was it 4 in the afternoon, or midnight or 11 in the morning? After a nice hot cleansing with the twin-headed shower in my room and an international breakfast buffet downstairs, I took my usual taxi commute to work. The driver knew to take me to Oracle, but this morning, we were at another building labeled Oracle, though it looked different from the building yesterday. Was it just the backside of the building, or was it a different office? I later found out there were 4 separate buildings all located within about 2 km of each other. I just had to mention the building by the Christ College and the driver knew where to go.

The routine at work was mostly the same as yesterday – breakfast at the cafeteria while watching the next round of the Australian Open, then starting the workshops again. The team was starting to experiment with some of the new knowledge from the presentations yesterday. I was mainly hanging around not only to help them get their projects working, but also to iron out issues that we discovered along the way.



We decided to head out for lunch. It was cool to see Brinda again – she had worked for our team in HQ for several years before heading back to India. She stopped by and decided to have lunch with us. Instead of getting the usual food at the cafeteria, we walked down the street to the Forum. A newly built modern shopping mall, it includes everything a business traveler could want – American KFC, McDonalds, Pizza Hut, Subway, you name it. Once inside, you could easily forget you were in India – it looked like just another mall in San Jose. But on our 2-block walk to the mall, we passed a Hindu temple carved from a rock – maybe hundreds of years old, right across the street from a brand new apartment complex.

We all took different styles of cuisine before sitting down at a table in the cafeteria – South Indian, North Indian, Chinese (actually Indian Chinese), Thai, Middle Eastern, Mexican, and Swiss. Actually I should say Indian Thai, Indian Middle Eastern, and Indian Swiss – all the workers and chefs at the restaurants were Indian – unlike the Bay Area where generally ethnic restaurants are owned by ethnic people who have brought their cuisine to America. It was still nice to have so many different choices – even though the South Indian food was good, it sometimes felt a bit repetitive and it was nice to have some variety. I took a chicken shwarma and shared some chicken and appam and dosas with the others – eating family style is pretty common in India.

We headed back to the office for the afternoon and continued on the workshops. We again did our usual chai tea and biscuits break around 3, then tea and food on the terrace around sunset. It was a good day, and people were quite successful with the workshops – it was rewarding to see their progress. I was a bit sleepy – still getting over a bit of the jetlag, but better than earlier. Around 6:30, a bunch of people decided to head out for dinner. It was cool going out to different restaurants in Bangalore and hanging out. About 5 of us went out to the Coconut Grove near MG Road – it was a nice place with many of the tables outside under the warm and starry sky. We enjoyed appams with egg and chicken with coconut juice. They served us tap water too – that was the custom, but some of us opted for bottled water – even many of the locals take bottled water. Again, we ate everything with our hands – it was actually pretty natural and would have been awkward using utensils. We would tear off pieces of bread and scoop up some of the chicken and eat it that way. We finished the meal with the customary sweet seeds to cleanse the palate.

Jan 26

Today was a major holiday in India – it was Republic Day, celebrating the signing of the constitution. We ended up working just about a half day – I felt bad seeing most of the team coming in on a holiday (though it was Wednesday, and not a 3-day weekend), but they knew I had flown out to do the presentations for them. I got into work around 9:30 and the office was empty! I had heard some rumors about some layoffs the previous day as a result of the PeopleSoft merger, but I didn't expect it to impact IDC that much. I had forgotten about the holiday! I took advantage of this extra time and called home on one of the VoIP phones at work (the call was free, since it's over IP) – Mom and Dad were excitedly surprised to hear my voice!

I IM'ed my manager and he slowly started breaking the bad news about D-Day the day before... apparently it had been a pretty rough day back at HQ and I had missed the worst of it. There had been a lot of uncertainty concerning the PeopleSoft deal and we didn't know what to expect. We ended up losing 2 people from our team (about 10% across the board in CRM). One of those was a PM and the other was a transfer who ended up getting trapped in a limbo state between his old group and our group, and since he wasn't officially part of either group at the time, he was let go. I later found out there was even someone who used to be in our team who had also flown out to India for vacation and to get his visa renewed, who was laid off and left stranded in India because his business visa became invalid. All his stuff and responsibilities of course were still in the US.

Fortunately he was with his family, which softened the blow a little, but it was still pretty merciless.

Although the layoffs had very little personal impact on my job, it was still quite saddening to hear them go. I finished another round of presentations and workshops until about 12:30, and we then headed over to a Chinese place for lunch. It was actually another Indian Chinese restaurant (owned and run not by Chinese, but Indian people).

Chop suey, spring rolls, fried rice, and Kingfisher beer (locally brewed in Bangalore) made a satisfying meal while Hitesh being a bit adventurous decided to try his hands at chopsticks for the first time. After fumbling a little at first, he actually did quite well with them!



Again, we were near MG road and just a couple blocks from the Taj, so Pradeep dropped me off. Hitesh and I had planned to get together in the evening, so during the afternoon I decided to head out for a little walk around town. An autorickshaw driver immediately spotted me with my map and camera and quickly offered me a ride. I turned him down a couple times, not knowing how much I could trust him, but in the end I got a personal tour of Bangalore of about an hour for Rs 10 (about 25 cents!) I showed him the picture of some interesting buildings on the map and he said, “I take you there, and there, and many interesting places”. We ended up touring the Ulsoor Lake gardens, St Francis Xavier church, the Vidhana Soudha and High Court (some of the government buildings), St Mary’s Basilica, and a few handicraft shops. We also passed numerous high tech companies including Intel and Accenture, where right across the street, poor women would be selling colorful silk garments and shoes. The city had many beautiful churches – The Xavier church was a traditional Gothic cathedral like those in Europe, complete with spires, rose windows, flying buttresses and high arched ceilings. The city also had many mosques with beautiful colorful mosaic floors, as well as a couple Jain and Sikh temples, a testament to the presence of the minority religions in Bangalore. There seemed to be a great element of religious freedom where people could worship without feeling threat of persecution. I wondered how the driver could afford to take me on a 1 hr tour for just Rs 10, but I also knew the autorickshaw drivers generally get about 10% kickbacks from the handicraft shops (that’s why he was so eager to take me shopping, though I repeatedly declined since I had seen a bunch of shops already), meaning if I bought just one gift (like a silk rug for Rs 10000), he could earn Rs 1000, making the Rs 10 irrelevant. I felt bad completely ripping him off, so I bought a small sandalwood box from one of the shops.

Back in the hotel, Hitesh rang me on my cell and mentioned he was on his way. We were going up the ISKCON temple a bit north of the city – I didn’t realize it at the time, but we ended up going to one of the most amazing temples I had ever seen. Hitesh pulled up the

lobby and I hopped on the back seat of his 125 cc Honda. It was a bit of a ride getting up to the temple, about 20 km north on the usual narrow and bumpy and dusty streets full of traffic. My butt was a bit sore after the 45 minute ride, but it was definitely worth it – the temple was visible from probably a whole km away – all the gopuram towers lit in a dazzling white light. The main temple is dedicated to Krishna (one of the main Hindu gods, who plays a flute) and his lover Radha (easy to remember since one of our coworker’s name is Radhakrishnan!). Unfortunately cameras were not allowed inside – I checked mine in with my shoes as we proceeded through the metal detectors up the many flights of steps. The white polished marble was very smooth under our feet as we went up. Hitesh had paid about Rs 100 to give us “express access to the gods” – so we didn’t have to wait in the huge line as hundreds of people were making their pilgrimage. We visited a couple smaller gods in smaller separate temples before reaching Radha and Krishna. Inside each of the temples, the carvings of the gods were adorned in shiny gold with flowers draped around the neck – they also had candles burning in front of the altars. Worshipers were chanting praises to the gods “Hare Krishna” was one of the most common – it was a cacophony of chanting, ringing bells, beating drums and other instruments while other worshipers were bowing down prostrate. Many of the worshipers were performing their pujas and brushing the smoke from the candles on their foreheads. After the puja, a priest would place a tilak of red turmeric on their foreheads, and then offer a cup of holy water to drink (it didn’t look filtered... was it safe?)



After visiting the gods, we enjoyed a nice meal of sweet yellow rice and samosas for Rs 10 as we sat down on the mats with the other worshipers. It was nice to relax a bit – I had been going almost non-stop since I landed in Bangalore. After the meal, we wandered downstairs in the temple through a bunch of shops – the money from the shops helps with the upkeep of the temple. One of the shops was like the Cauvery, full of sandalwood elephants, bronze statues of the gods, and intricate wood inlays. Again, so much beautiful stuff – if I

bought something big, I wondered how I would bring it home!

We did a bit of a detour on the way back, visiting a nightclub. You could hear the Hindi pop music playing even before we parked the bike downstairs. As we entered, we were immediately blasted with the music as we saw a bunch of people dancing. I first thought we might get a drink and start dancing, when I saw they were all women dancing – and everyone sitting were men! The sensual entertainment was rather blatant – my first thought was just to leave right away – I had been reading how sex slaves are exploited in other countries, especially poorer ones like India – but the women with their colorful saris and the music were captivating. Actually this particular club was pretty clean and it was doubtful the women were being exploited, but outside the city, many women are forced into slavery with empty promises of a better future that never comes.

I definitely felt like I was the first foreigner to visit this place in a long time. We took Kingfishers and some tandoori chicken and hung out a bit. It was interesting to go to places that tourists rarely see – it painted a very different picture of the culture than many get to see. In a way, this evening reminded me of visiting the backcountry of a national park – displaying wonders rarely seen or appreciated. It had been a long but interesting day – we were only a few minutes back to the Taj, where I got some much-needed rest.

Jan 27

This was a bit mellower of a day – again I had my usual breakfast at the Taj – everything from rice porridge to waffles to idly to scrambled eggs, and apple bananas, chickoo, and lychee for fruit. My taxi showed up a bit late – seeming to get later each day, but often they run on Indian time – promptness isn't necessarily an important value as in American culture.

Work was pretty mellow too – again continuing on the presentations and workshops – we were almost done. Only thing is Jagpreet had spent 4 days to present about the same material I was to do in 2 days! They were pretty patient as we worked out the details – they were happy just to have me be able to teach it to them.

Lunch at the cafeteria was the usual South Indian cuisine with idly with sambar and chutney and chai tea. It was hard to believe it was already Thursday – at first the days seemed to go by so slow, since there were so many new experiences and challenges, but once we were going, the time started to fly by. I emailed a few more pictures back home – I had some of the temple from last night and from around Bangalore. It was great to be able to keep in touch so easily since I was almost always online.

We wrapped up the day and Harish and I decided to head out to another place around MG road – we headed over to a Hyderabadi / North Indian restaurant and enjoyed some Tandoori chicken and roti with Kingfisher beers. The restaurant was quite new with elegant décor – probably built in the last year or so. Many of the restaurants were very new, as Bangalore was rapidly developing due to the income of so many high tech enterprises, and many new people could afford to eat out. The service was impeccable, as was often the case in Indian culture – they promptly dished all the food on our plates, poured our beers, and even lit Harish's cigarette in his mouth. Afterward, we enjoyed paan made by hand at a local stand – cleansing our palates with a rich variety of flavors – very much worth the Rs 5. It was just a couple minutes back to the Taj and it was getting late – it was past 10:00 since we had dinner at the usual time of about 8:00.

Jan 28

I felt like I was finally mostly over the jetlag – I woke up just before my alarm. It was nice to just have 1 day to go. I was looking forward to taking a 5-day tour of south India and visiting some other places. Srinivas's sister had done a bit of the work to get the reservations made.

Things got off to a bit of a rough start, however – starting with my taxi showing up over an hour late – they claimed they had blown a tire on the way over, but who knows what

the real story was – they could have completely blown me off or forgotten. Later, I found out some things had changed with my tour. As was typically the case with travel in India, frequent confirmations were necessary, since times and plans would change frequently and it was our responsibility to find out when they changed their plans. It turned out the tour was just a 4-day tour, arriving on the morning of the 5th day (so that whole day was empty). I would later find out that one of the other tours had been canceled since they only had a few people interested – again it was up to us to call and find out it was canceled, instead of them notifying us! Unfortunately, with many cities being very crowded in India, it would be easy to be left behind – travelers had to be ever alert and cautious.

I got the final presentations and wrapped up – they had pretty much all the information they needed to finish everything. However, many people were bogged down with bugs and other urgent projects that had come up – their project plans were still moving forward even though they had spent much time on the workshops. The week had been quite productive, with many new issues being uncovered and much valuable information transferred.

We enjoyed lunch at the MTR restaurant in Bangalore (which I later found out is among the top 100 of the world) – it is a city landmark! We left early, since it easily fills to overflowing with people having to wait an hour for a table. We were treated to our own private dining room and we made sure our stomachs were empty for a feast! No menus were necessary – we were having a traditional thali meal, including a sampling of about 20 different dishes served on our metal trays. The waiters would repeatedly come by with metal buckets and dish out portion after portion of idly, rice, vada, sambar, chutney – I can't even list them all here – the spices and flavors were a treat to the mouth. I was rapidly getting full, and we weren't even halfway done yet – I had barely started one dish and they were heaping another dish on top! Pradeep was a machine – devouring each scoop as it came – his stomach was well trained! After almost an hour of continuous eating, we topped it off with paan – again a tasty way to end a great meal and to settle the stomach after a lot of spicy food.



Hitesh was again free in the evening – I was wondering where he might take me this time, but we just mellowed out a bit. We rode over to his apartment – a pretty modern building on the outskirts of the city. The apartment was quite nice – not unlike those in the Bay Area, but the ride was a bit nerve-racking, over another one of the “craters of the moon” roads. We picked up some milk at the grocery store in his complex (no need to go outside for groceries!), and made some tea while watching some of his extensive DVD collection! We also visited one of his local temples, just down the street from his

apartment. We headed back to the office where I had dropped off my luggage – I was planning on staying with Pradeep overnight to catch an early bus for the tour tomorrow.

Over at Pradeep's, I was starting to get my luggage ready for the tour – it was nice to have a place to leave most of it behind, and only take some clothes and necessary items on the tour. After a semi-hot shower (I wasn't used to having to switch on the hot water tank ahead of time), and getting my bag packed, I hit the sack.

Jan 29

Early morning wake up around 6 AM – we had to be ready to catch a 7 AM bus starting to Mysore. The tour was planned to spend the first day getting to Mysore and spending overnight there – then it was off to Ooty on the second day and overnight there. The third day was going to Kodaikanal – it took most of the day to get there. We would overnight there and spend the 4th day also in Kodaikanal before taking an overnight bus back to Bangalore.

Pradeep and I hung out as our bus showed up about an hour late (again Indian time), and I was off. We headed over to another travel terminal and got on the main bus. Travel and tourism was amazingly popular in India – there were constantly buses leaving with different companies and I had to make sure I was on the right one!

It was about 4 hours to Mysore – although it was only about 140 km south, there are no freeways you could go 110 km/h like everywhere in the US. For most of the distance, we would be passing towns with shops and houses – it wouldn't be until tomorrow that we would get into open country with fields and farms. Having lived close to a freeway in CA for many years, it was a bit of a shock to realize the answer to “so when do we get on the freeway” is “there are no freeways here”!

The bus ride gave an interesting cross-section of Indian society and culture. The different strata of society were fairly apparent, especially as we left the city. Many poor people were wandering the streets and begging – many were performing menial tasks such as washing vast amounts of laundry or sweeping the dusty streets or chipping stones in a quarry. I had been reading about the Hindu caste system and its grip on society, and especially how the Dalits (also known as Untouchables) had suffered for many generations with very little hope of upward progress.

Although the Hindu caste system has been around for thousands of years, within the city of Bangalore with its infusion of high-tech and modern culture, many of the strata were being rapidly blended together. Much of the distinctions in caste were falling apart in as little as one generation. One friend commented that “his girlfriend was of a lower caste” – first it was striking that he mentioned about a girlfriend (marriages had been arranged for thousands of years by the families with the husband and wife barely knowing each other until their wedding day), and second it was striking that she was of a different caste (it would have been unthinkable to marry outside your caste – it would cast great shame on the family). In fact, the in-laws were quite at odds with this decision, and they would probably end up growing rather distant from each other. There would be a vast

generation gap. However, the children of this mixed couple might end up thinking the caste system was a relic and disrespect its restrictions.

We passed many schools – India has one of the fastest growing populations in the world with an exponential number of children. Many of the schools are single gender and often we would see the girls and boys in uniform playing or lining up for class. Hindu temples of different shapes and colors and sizes were about as common as petrol stations in the US - reminding me of how religious the people were. We slowly made our way toward Mysore as we dodged the numerous potholes, weaved between different sides of the street (when the other side of the double road was under construction), and avoided the cows wandering in the middle of the street.

We made our first stop – breakfast at a local restaurant on the way. Again, more of the usual south Indian cuisine – I was getting quite used to it and was looking forward to a bit of variety, but it was also nice to have some predictability when so many other things were uncertain. We also stopped for a bit at a toy and handicraft store – Indians take great pride in their handicrafts including carvings, wood inlays, and sculptures. I didn't buy anything yet – since I figured we'd make many stops at places like this, and they would generally get cheaper later on, and I would have a better idea what I liked.

The tour took us through the ruins of Srirangapatnam, which was Tipu Sultan's capital from where they ruled much of South India during the 18th century. Much of it had been destroyed when the British came in and conquered much of India, but many of the walls still remained. We also passed a mosque and a beautiful ancient Hindu temple. Even though this ancient Sri Ranganathaswamy temple was about 1000 years old, its carved stone columns and gopuram were still just as beautiful as then.

This was really the first time I was in a tourist area in India, and I immediately got hit with a barrage of vendors trying to rip me off with wooden trinkets, carved snakes, chessboards, and other junk. At least there was a bit of refuge inside the temple, but once back outside, it was incessant! They would even knock on the windows of the bus trying to sell junk! In the end, however it worked to my advantage, since they had to lower their prices so many times to arouse my interest – I ended up buying 4 sandalwood carvings for Rs 100, the same price they had originally offered for just one. Haggling was a common practice in India – rarely would anyone ever think of paying face value for anything on the street, and often the deals were enormous.

After lunch, we headed over to the famous Mysore palace – one of the most magnificent structures in South India. Built in 1912 as the seat of the maharaja in Mysore, the colorful towers grace the skyline. Unfortunately, cameras were not allowed inside the palace – supposedly the flashes would ruin the artwork inside (but the place is so grand a puny camera flash was have little effect) – it's probably just a ploy to get them to sell more postcards. The stone columns, stained glass ceiling, furniture, and paintings were awe-inspiring, and the Shweta Varahaswamy temple was quite impressive. The palace held the gold throne of the maharaja, supposedly using some 60 kg of solid gold. We hired an English-speaking guide to show us around (after shopping around, we found a

good one). However, we didn't really have enough time to see everything – we found ourselves getting more rushed near the end, since we had to be back on the bus to catch our next stop on the tour. This would all too often be the case – these tours could only allow very little time at each stop in order to show so many different places. It was still very well worth the stop and I would love to come back again.



We headed out over toward Chamundi Hill – famous for its 850 year old Sri Chamundiswari temple with a towering 7-storey gopuram. Although many pilgrims prefer climbing the 1000 steps to the summit, the 30-minute bus ride was a bit easier on the knees! As soon as we were off the bus we were again bombarded with the usual guys selling trinkets, but we were also surrounded by wild monkeys – the gray furry friends were everywhere. Actually many of the locals treated them as pests, but for me they were fascinating and deserved a closer look. Animals were

everywhere – cows, goats and dogs also roamed around the streets.

The view from the top was impressive – Mysore palace was visible as well as several other palaces – Mysore seemed to be a city of palaces. The imposing figure of the demon Mahishasura stood watch outside with his large sword – he was one of the victims of the goddess of Chamundi, according to legend. Just a little way down from the top was a bull statue of Nandi – the 5 m high bull being one of the largest in India and visited by hordes of pilgrims.

One of the delights of Mysore is the Brindavan Gardens – I thought we wouldn't have time since it was getting late, but we still made it. A delightful boat ride across the lake took us to a bunch of dancing colorful fountains that moved to the rhythm of Hindi pop music. Near the fountain was probably one of the tallest guys in India – he must have been about 8 feet tall – especially tall considering the average height of men in India is probably only about 5-5 or so. Rs 10 brought us some entertaining photos. Maybe he could be the Yao Ming of India if he played ball! We stayed and enjoyed the music and choreography of the dancing water spiraling and jumping up and down in graceful arcs.

Some of the people were heading back to Bangalore (and probably getting back after 1 AM), but the rest of us stayed overnight at a decent hotel. After doing the math, I realized it was a good time to call home – since it was Saturday morning – Mom and Dad were pleasantly surprised, and the signal was remarkably clear. Much of India never built a phone infrastructure for landlines, but they have built a great cell phone infrastructure that is better than the US in many areas.

Jan 30

It was a good night sleep after a big day yesterday. After some complimentary tea at the desk, we were checked out and ready to catch the bus at 8. We swung by the gates of Mysore palace for another look before getting on the road toward Ooty. Ooty was about another 5 hours from Mysore, but was a beautiful drive.

We proceeded south, entering into Bandipur National Park – famous for its wildlife. At night, tigers often are seen prowling in the bushes. Elephants are sometimes seen wandering as well. Although we didn't see wild elephants on our way through the park, we did see some people riding elephants – that's something I would have liked to do if we had the time. We got to see plenty of spotted deer as well – often they would be grazing in small groups. Wild monkeys swung around in the trees – mostly small gray ones, but some larger black ones were up in the branches. The park is also known for its beautiful forests – sandalwood and teak forests.



Unfortunately, large areas of India have been deforested as the country has developed, so the forests were a welcome respite back to nature.

It was nice to be on what felt more like a freeway now – we were probably going around 60-70 km/h as we passed seemingly endless swatches of fields and rice paddies. We were slowly climbing as we could tell by the tiers of rice terraces. Most of the farmers still tended their fields the way they have for thousands of years – with manual labor and with oxen. Two oxen would be yoked together and would pull the plow to till the fields and the seeds were planted by hand. South India had been dry for several months – the monsoon had ended and the days were hot and dry, resulting in many fields starting to turn brown and barren. The rains wouldn't start for several months later, as the monsoon starts around early May in the southern part of India and moves northward over the next couple months. Many of the farmers and villagers appeared to live on the basic necessities of life – many walking with bare feet down to the streams while carrying water pots and supplies balanced on their heads – things probably had changed little or not at all for a thousand years.

The hillsides started getting more steep and rugged as we moved into Tamil Nadu – the state southeast of Karnataka. The road often proceeded through tight switch-backed turns up the steep hills – the driver would honk on each sharp turn as a warning just in case another vehicle was coming the other way. The rice plantations gave way to dense eucalyptus forests and banana plantations and eventually coffee and tea plantations as we ascended up the mountain into the clouds.

The hill station of Ooty sits fairly high in the mountains at about 2240 m elevation – it was noticeably cooler and wetter in the mountains – even during the dry season, heavy rain can occur at any time. The greenery was very lush – it felt like we were a million



miles away from the pollution in Bangalore! We passed a wide river valley – with lush green fields along the banks which sloped up into the mountains shrouded in clouds - a very scenic spot for group of people playing cricket. We stopped at a small mountain hotel owned by some villagers for a chai tea and restroom break (anywhere along the side of the road was OK). A simple propane tank and burner and pot composed the kitchen – enough to make tea or idly or a variety of

other dishes. Coke and Pepsi and Sprite were available alternatives, but the tea was excellent – especially since we were in tea plantation country!

Ooty was beautiful – our first stop was Ooty Lake Park – a little theme park built around the lake. I had made a couple friends on the tour and we went for a spin in the dashing cars (bumper cars in US), watched a thrilling 3-D action movie complete with the moving seats, and took a paddleboat ride on the serene Ooty Lake. It was a fun little family amusement park and a great way to spend the afternoon. After enjoying ice creams for Rs 5, we realized we had been enjoying ourselves a bit too long and were 15 minutes late for the bus! Fortunately, the bus was still waiting (though a bit impatiently) and we were the last ones back on.

We also stopped at the botanical gardens near the center of town – where families could spend the afternoon relaxing amid the sculptured gardens. Some kids were playing kabaddi – an ancient Indian game of tag where people from one team would try to tag people from the other side, but as long as you were on the offence, you had to constantly utter the word “kabaddi” in one breath (limiting how long you could chase your opponents!)

It was getting near sunset, and we didn’t want to risk being late for the bus again – so we promptly made our way back toward the bus in time for our ride to the hotel. Dinner at the hotel was fairly simple – chicken tikku with roti. After dinner, it was fun to roam the different shops in town – much better discounts and without people running up to you trying to sell junk. I bought a wood inlay of some elephants and some clothes – nice shirts for Rs 200 (about \$4.50).

Jan 31

Today was more of a travel day – it was about 8 hrs to Kodaikanal, but the ride was very scenic. I checked out of the hotel in Ooty to catch the 9:00 bus, which ended up showing up after 10:00. Since I was the only one in this particular hotel from the tour, I had worried that I got lost or left behind – actually everything was fine and things were just

running a bit slower than planned. I got transferred to another bus and then another and finally we were on our way by around 10:30. Unfortunately, on the bus were either all couples or families (with even numbers of people), and they decided to place me up at the front of the bus on a plastic chair nearby the driver – and it was an 8 hr bus ride! The alternative would have been to sit next to somebody else’s wife! The chair ended up tipping over a couple times on the steep turns in the beginning when I wasn’t paying attention – I had to be careful!

Kodaikanal is actually a very popular honeymooners area in India – like Hawaii is for Americans. It was actually a very beautiful drive, as we wined down from Ooty through the lush tea plantations in the cloud-capped mountains of the Western Ghats. We crossed a wide plain where we took breakfast at a local restaurant. The scenery was back to the endless farms and fields and rice paddies with only some small villages and pockets of civilization. Lunch was again at a small local restaurant where we had some more of the traditional South Indian cuisine. Paan from a small stand and fresh coconuts for Rs 10 made a fine dessert. The coconuts were from a simple street vendor on a bicycle with a bunch of coconuts and a machete and a bunch of straws.

We crossed a wide plain dotted with many small granite peaks dotted with temples. The town of Palani is famous for some of its temples only reachable by a strenuous climb of hundreds of steps. Beyond the plain, we started climbing the next range of mountains up a steep switch-backing road – in places the road was only barely wide enough for our bus to fit. Vehicles coming the other way would either have to back up to a turnout to let us pass. Occasionally, our bus would do the backing – extremely carefully to avoid slipping off the 1000-foot drops on one side with no guardrails. The rainforest gave way to rice terraces, extensive eucalyptus forests and more lush green tea plantations as we climbed into the clouds.

The climb was one of the most spectacular drives in India. The evening rays were hitting the mountains with golden hues and a brilliant red rainbow arced across some of the peaks. Waterfalls cascaded down the steep rocky cliffs, and below us a huge lake sparkled in the valley and range after range of mountains in different hues filled the background. Several times we had to slow down to dodge the wild monkeys hopping across the road, and even a wild peacock graced us with its presence. We neared the hill station of Kodaikanal as we passed the roaring Silver Cascade waterfall. Numerous small villages lined the road – various collections of straw and bamboo huts composed the houses and shops. A brief stop at an outdoor Hindu temple gave a glimmer at the daily life of the villagers. The temple was just an alcove in a large rock painted with red and white stripes with a couple



simple stands for the gods. Some villagers passed by – a barefoot woman was carrying jars of water down the steep rocky steps toward her village.

We stopped at a small village to take tea and make a restroom stop – an old man was stirring an enormous pot of idly with his bare arm just before pouring it into some tin cups to form it. No FDA regulations in the mountain village! The food stand was just a kitchen with a couple burners and simple pots – that was all that was needed. A friend I had made on the tour offered to pay for tea for us – but I promised to pay for the drinks next time. The tea was very good and they were thankful for our patronage. It seemed a bit doubtful that a lot of tourists made it to this area. One memorable moment was seeing a bunch of kids walking back to their village, and when they saw our bus, how they got so excited and eagerly waved. Children in the villages live such a simple life that they can still enjoy and relish simple things.

We had finally reached the town of Kodaikanal – it was amazing seeing a town located near the tops of the steep hillsides. At 2100 m, it is one of the highest settlements in the Western Ghats. Our group started to split up a bit – since many of us were in different hotels. A few of us picked a local vegetarian restaurant where we took Mysore dosas and lassi and visited a couple of the local markets. I got checked in to the hotel and enjoyed just laying on the bed eating fresh oranges and apple bananas bought at a local stand. The variety of TV programs was surprising – consisting of several traditional Hindi stations with what appeared to be Hindu related worship. But there were also a European football game and an American snowboarding halfpipe competition. Though snowboarding was invented in America, it has definitely become an element of the ubiquitous pop culture that can be found even in remote places where few Americans probably see.

Feb 1

Today was our day to see around Kodaikanal – a town famous for its amazing natural scenery. Unfortunately, because of its elevation, it is often capped with clouds and it rains frequently. It rained overnight, but stopped by the morning – however, the fog still lingered, resulting in a rather mysterious atmosphere.

We visited several of the sights – a beautiful pine forest enshrouded in the mist – straight from the Lord of the Rings. A couple other stops at some vistas including Coaker’s walk and Pillar Rocks were nice, but unfortunately were mostly fogged out. The waterfalls however were beautiful. The grass was a lush verdant carpet as a white cascade tumbled through – the hills were as green as in Ireland. We also visited an old church set up by American missionaries – Kodaikanal is the only hill station in India set up totally by Americans – in fact Kodaikanal International school, set up



by missionaries, is one of India's most prestigious private schools. The languages were just English and Tamil – the absence of Hindi was striking. We were about as far as Delhi as you could get, and many people in Tamil Nadu resisted influence from the north, including the language.

We visited the upper lake view vista – the fog had lifted just enough where we could see down toward serene Kodaikanal Lake in the distance. By sheer coincidence, I got to meet a couple friends from the tour yesterday – they had also gone on to Kodaikanal via a different tour bus and happened to end up at the lake view at the same time (but we both thought we might end up on the same bus – actually I still owed them drinks too!) It was cool to hang out for a bit until they pushed us back on the bus – actually we would end up meeting up again in Bangalore a couple days later too! We spent part of the afternoon at the lake, hiring a rowboat for a few tens of rupees and enjoying the tranquility. Tea at a local stand by the lake was delicious – made with several local spices that I don't remember having elsewhere. A wave of dense fog passed over the lake, enshrouding the shores in a mysterious white blanket – but soon afterward, it started clearing and patches of blue sky emerged.

My hopes of a nice sunset ended up finally being realized – when we were back at our hotel, the fog completely opened up, pulling back the curtain on the most amazing panoramic view of the city. Golden light lit the clouds and distant mountains, and terraced rice fields lined the hillsides.

It had been an interesting tour of South India – it was time to finally get back on the bus to head back to Bangalore. The luggage was packed and the 5:00 bus showed up around 6:00. However, I soon found out that I had somehow been left without a reservation on the bus – I had gotten on with everyone else, but later they told me to wait and a different bus was supposed to come get me. I wondered why, since I was supposed to be heading back to Bangalore with the rest of the tour. I may never know what happened, but I ended up without a seat on the bus. However, the tour company was gracious to make sure I got back to Bangalore, and they put up the money to put me on a public bus at the city bus stand. It turns out much of business in India happens in a rather cutthroat manner, and people can easily be left behind. If anyone does not show on time for a bus, there are plenty of other people who would be happy to take your spot. I felt fortunate for them to look after me to make sure I got back OK.

Every cloud has a silver lining, and the bus they put me on turned out to be a sleeper coach with comfortable reclining seats. We promptly pulled out from the bus stop (one of the few things that operated on time), and started heading down the mountain back toward Bangalore. I started to doze, but occasionally thought to glance outside – I think we were going back a different way, and there was the most beautiful sparkling lake outside glimmering in the moonlight.

We stopped for dinner – a simple restaurant kind of like the American equivalent of fast food. Dosas for Rs 20 were served promptly, and I enjoyed a meal that I didn't expect that we'd have. I must have slept for a bit later but was awoken when I realized the guy

next to me had laid his head on my shoulder and his arm was across my back! I guess that when people are so tired, it didn't really matter. A couple hours later, we found ourselves stopped for what seemed an eternity – an ambulance had arrived, but little could be done because of an enormous traffic jam! After being stopped for at least an hour or two, we finally started creeping forward – the cause of the jam became immediately clear when we saw an incredible traffic wreck with a head-on collision. I tried to count the vehicles stopped the other direction, but lost count after 200 or so! I felt lucky that the stop was only an hour or two – it looks like it could have been many hours.

Feb 2

We had finally reached Bangalore at around 8:30 in the morning – I immediately recognized we were back when we passed right by the Oracle buildings! An autorickshaw took me from the city bus terminal to the Ballal where I was staying for my last 3 nights in Bangalore. After a nice hot shower and free breakfast, I caught up on a bit of sleep for an hour or so.

Since today ended up not being a day of touring, I decided to come back into the office and catch up on some stuff and check on how the team was doing with the workshops and new material. It was good to see Srinivas again, and he invited me to his place for lunch. We had a traditional thali meal courtesy of his parents – they are excellent cooks! After eating for about a half hour, I was already full when they kept bringing more rice and helpings of other dishes! I guess I have to stay longer in India to get my stomach trained to handle the huge portions! Indian culture is known for its hospitality. Srinivas's parents had a nice home in Bangalore – it used to be on the outskirts of town about 20 years ago, but now was right in the middle of the city as it grew around their place.

Back at work for the afternoon, I wrapped up some more of the open issues from our workshops the previous week. It was nice also at the end of the day to send a few photos back home and catch up with friends. I just took it pretty easy after work – I was still a bit tired from the long bus ride and lack of real sleep. The Ballal was in a perfect location – right next to Brigade and MG road in the heart of a great shopping district. It was hard to resist the great deals, and after a couple hours, I walked away with a brand new pair of \$19 shoes and some \$5 shirts and CD's.

Feb 3

Even though I had been in Bangalore for over a week, I still hadn't seen a lot of the sights around town. For about Rs 150 (about \$3-4), I did an all-day city tour. We started at the ISKCON temple – the same place I had visited with Hitesh last week. It was quite a bit different during the day – and also without paying the money to get “quicker access to the gods”. Worshipers are supposed to methodically repeat a chant to praise the gods – uttering an exhausting 108 times “Hare Krishna and Hare Rama”, each time stepping on a new stone as they proceed toward the threshold of the temple.

I got to meet a nice young family on the bus – a mother, father, and daughter, and they started treating me as a son. Again, as a testimony of Indian hospitality, they ended up



covering the cost of breakfast for me – I offered to pay my portion but they repeatedly gave the money back to me and paid my portion. Our next stop was a giant bull statue, similar to the Nandi sculpture on Chamundi Hill in Mysore. Built in the Dravidian style in the 16th century, it is one of Bangalore’s oldest. After observing a puja and wafting the smoke from the candles across our heads, the priest blessed us by placing tilaks on our foreheads. Later, outside the temple,

the father offered me some sugarcane juice from a local stand. At first I hesitated, but later couldn’t resist a nice cool glass of sweet juice for Rs 5 made right there from a machine which extracted the juice from the fresh sugarcane stalks.

Our next stop was the Tipu Sultan’s palace in the center of Bangalore. Built in 1791 by Tipu Sultan, the palace is rather unique in its construction using wooden teak pillars. The Venkataraman Temple right next door was also rather magnificent. As we toured the streets of Bangalore, it was neat to see so many ornate temples and buildings – even the commonplace temples were rather exotic. In the suburbs in the SF bay area, even a modest temple in Bangalore would be a sight to behold!

Before lunch, we toured the extensive Lalbach gardens, the largest in the garden city of Bangalore covering nearly a full square km. Constructed in the 18th century by Hyder Ali and his son Tipu Sultan, the garden featured an extensive array of flowers and ancient trees. A large rose garden had been built and tended in observance of Republic Day, which happened last week. The garden was a very peaceful place – seemingly far from the hustle and bustle all around us. On one end were a couple 500-year old tropical trees whose roots must have been 50 feet in diameter and about 15 feet high! A large glass house modeled after the Crystal Palace in London was full of different tropical plants.

We had a quick lunch at a local restaurant nearby the gardens before heading to the city science museum. It was a fun place to spend the afternoon – and it contained an extensive array of exhibits about the history of machines and engines, electricity and magnetism, space, and even a full-size dinosaur that moved! Our last stop was a handicraft emporium – full of sandalwood sculptures, fine silks, and wood inlays. I had already lost count of how many different similar shops we had already



visited – I wonder how many other tourists were going to get ripped off. The same stuff was so much cheaper during the tour in Ooty.

The tour just so happened to end right along MG road – just a couple blocks from the Ballal. Instead of having to ride all the way back to the bus station and come back, I just got off the bus right there off MG road! It was about 5:00 and I figured I could wander a bit on MG road and shop a bit before grabbing dinner somewhere. I passed another handicraft shop – but this one was different. It was more like a museum, with many historical artifacts and fascinating ancient stone carvings. Some of the sculptures ran over Rs 5 lakh – about \$10,000 US. But if the money wasn't enough of a barrier, (and the size and weight of the sculptures), many of the stone carvings required a permit from the department of archaeology in order to take them out of the country!

As soon as I stepped out, the most amazing thing happened – two of the guys whom I had meet on the Ooty trip appeared! Somehow in a city with over 5 million people, I happened to run across these two friends (and I had met them at the lake view in Kodaikanal). We hung out a bit, taking smoothies and sharing memories from the tour – they also remembered that I had promised to buy the drinks this time! Though smoothies are popular in America, they were just beginning to become popular in Bangalore, and I introduced my 2 friends to them for the first time.

Back in the room, it was nice to just relax and catch up on some of the news on TV. The news was so much more international than we get in the US. Unfortunately in the US, most of the news is filtered by what stories will be the most interesting for Americans and make the most money. It is way too easy for Americans to live obliviously to what happens in most of the world. There were also various Hindi programs, music videos, football games, game shows, movies, and pop culture shows, where viewers can be easily entertained with very little depth. India is the largest producer of movies in the world, surpassing Hollywood in its cinematic production. I found the most interesting shows and music to be the classical ones – although they were the most unfamiliar, they captured a depth of culture missed in the modern entertainment. It seems like no matter where you go these days, a similar style pop culture is invading society. Just like how McDonalds is everywhere today, American Idol style talent shows and reality shows are capturing a great audience – in fact, there is now an Indian Idol!

Feb 4

I had originally thought about doing another tour today – including stops at Belur, Halebid, and Shravanabelagola, but after finding out about the 9 hour bus ride required and we'd only have a couple hours actually at the temples, I decided to leave it behind. I've actually found the most memorable parts of the trip to be those areas where I was not just a tourist, but I was living and working as one of the locals. It is one thing to run around and try to see all the temples and palaces and great sights, but I found it much more meaningful to experience the daily life and culture.

I went back into work – this time, hiring an autorickshaw for Rs 30, which was by far the cheapest rate I had gotten so far. A cab was supposed to have arrived at 8:30, but after

not showing by 9:00, I decided to just let it go and take an auto. At work, there were 4 people from HQ now – me, Srinivas, Vijay (my old manager), and Brinda (who used to work at HQ, but transferred to Bangalore). Vijay had a good trip so far – first visiting a customer in Singapore before heading to Bangalore. In fact, I was planning on visiting Singapore on my way back - but just to hang out with a friend for fun, not business!

We had lunch at the Forum again – enjoying some Thai food this time. I realized later I should have at least gone into the McDonalds or KFC to see what it was like, but at the time, I had little interest in eating fatty American food. As we were walking the couple blocks back to the office, I noticed there was a small Hindu temple just across the street from the office! It was partly carved out of a large rock and elegantly decorated – interesting evidence of the fusion of cultures that could be found just on opposite sides of the street!

I had gotten everything pretty much wrapped up at work and was saying some final good byes, when a bunch of us decided to hang out at a club after work. Hitesh, Harish, Kartikeyan, and Pradeep were heading over to the Purple Haze near MG road – it’s a popular hangout and a great way to spend a few hours on a Friday night. Inside, it seemed almost no different from a similar club in the US – they were playing American MTV music videos (again evidence of the ubiquitous pop culture in MTV), serving American french fries (or do we call them freedom fries now?), serving beer, and people were dancing. Surprisingly, it wasn’t full of smoke as I had expected – actually it seemed like very few Indian people smoked, which was totally the opposite of most of Asia where everyone smoked! After hanging out for a couple hours, I started feeling like I was in Palo Alto or something, and when I was ready to head back home, I would just hop in my car and drive home – but then it dawned on me in a weird way that I was still in India! I was a bit homesick by the end of the trip – there is comfort in getting back to normal and following the usual routine. Sometimes I would have thoughts or dreams at night that I would wake up and I would be back in the Bay Area and everything was back to normal, but when I opened my eyes, I realized where I was.

Feb 5

This was my last day in India – at first, the trip seemed to last forever, with so many new experiences and things I learned, but now, it seemed to have gone by so quickly.

Yesterday, Harish and Hitesh had talked about getting together and hanging out today, and we decided to visit some places around Bangalore. We checked some places on the Internet, and later decided to head up to Nandi Hills, about 60 km north of Bangalore.

I got my last free breakfast at the Ballal, and after getting my luggage packed up, I got checked out. Harish and Hitesh picked me up from the hotel and we were off in Harish’s black Tata. Traffic was a bit rough getting out



of the city, but soon, it cleared up and we were on highway 7 heading north. A few checks with some locals along the way kept us on track to make sure we didn't get lost – Hitesh did the navigating by rolling down the window and asking questions to bystanders. Apparently that practice is fairly common in India, and it is best to ask several different people to make sure the majority understands where you are trying to go and agree on the direction.

We passed some beautiful Jain temples – easily recognizable by their rows of pink spires. A little ways up the road, we ran over a field of grain laid over the road – some farmers had spread the grain on the road so that the rolling of the cars acts like a giant millstone, which separates the wheat from the chaff. After a couple hours, the chaff is swept away and the grain is kept.

After a little stop for fresh coconuts by a local vendor on a bicycle, we were back on our way. The road actually improved nicely and we were able to get up to about 120 km/h on the smooth freshly paved road. It was like being on a freeway in CA – I had longed for 2 weeks to see a nice road like this one. However, my hopes were dashed in less than 1 km, where we passed the entrance to a quarry, and the heavy trucks coming out of the quarry had won deep ruts across the road. We had to slam on the brakes to avoid crashing over the 6-8 inch deep ruts. We often had to slow to a crawl to get over a bunch of bumps before being able to speed back up to freeway speed for a km or two.

The Nandi Hills were getting closer – the prominent granite domes reach about 600 m above the surrounding plain, and some have ancient fortresses and temples on top. One of the most famous hills has a Hindu temple that is 850 years old. The views rapidly improved as we climbed the steep switch-backing road to the top. Soon, we passed through the gate of the fortress, and parked outside the main temple. Wild monkeys swung from the trees all around us, and started climbing on our car. I had left my valuables inside – I had heard too many stories about people having phones or wallets taken by the monkeys when they weren't paying attention. I imagine the owners of some of the fruit stands nearby the temple end up inadvertently giving free meals to the monkeys!



The main temple was beautiful – the intricate stonework was so ancient, yet possessed a timeless quality that transcended the centuries. A few people were wandering inside to perform their pujas. It was one of the few temples where cameras were allowed inside – I was able to get a few snaps taken, but I didn't want to be in any way disrespectful to people who were trying to worship there. It was quite disrespectful for the sacred temple

to be simply treated as a museum where the gods were just works of art, even though I didn't worship any of the idols inside.

The hills were beautiful – it was like being on the granite rock of Half Dome in Yosemite, but this dome had a 850 year old temple on top! The view from the top was phenomenal. Tipu's drop is a 600 m sheer cliff face dropping straight to the valley floor – many hang gliders used this as a launching platform for a scenic ride. The fortress on top also contained many other artifacts, including a large pool used for religious ceremonies, with one of Tipu's thrones nearby, a school, nursery, and even a secret passage leading inside the fortress.

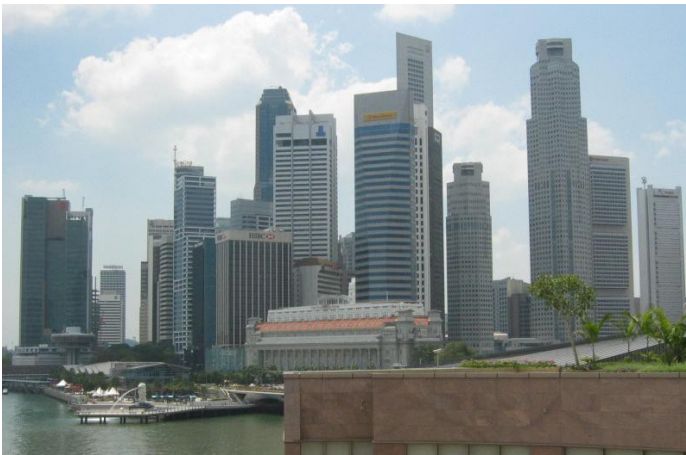
It was a fun afternoon hanging out at the Nandi hills, and we started making our way back toward Bangalore. On the way back, I noticed what appeared as some red rock canyons, and we stopped for a little side trip – it was a fascinating little place with some mud caves, natural arches, cliffs and interesting dry lake beds, all with the great view of the surrounding granite hills. Harish and I had some fun exploring the natural playground.

We enjoyed some biryani and roti and dhal for lunch at a small resort restaurant on the way back. Soon, we were reaching the outskirts of Bangalore – passing the Garden City skyway bridge – a marvel of architecture displayed in a beautiful cable suspension bridge. Back in the city, we went back to the office, where Pradeep had come in for a couple hours. He promised to take me to the airport since his car could fit my luggage. After hastily repacking my suitcases (combining 5 bags into 2), we were on our way.

It had been a great trip to India, and I would miss the team over there a lot. It was a great experience and I learned so much about a culture very different from our own. I spent my last couple hundred rupees on a silk tapestry at the airport, and soon afterward, they gave our boarding call for our flight to Singapore around midnight.

Feb 6

It was a red-eye flight to Singapore – about 4 hours in the air and a 2.5-hour time change. We were on the ground around 6:30. I had arranged earlier with my friend Winnie that we could spend the day in Singapore and hang out. Earlier, Winnie was in the SF bay area for an internship and we became good friends at church. Near the end of her stay in



the bay area, I took her around Marin County north of SF. Now, she was able to return the favor by taking me around Singapore!

Singapore seemed to be on the opposite end of the spectrum from India – it was a massive culture shock! The streets were impeccably clean, the buildings incredibly modern, and things

were pretty expensive. We spent the day just hanging out, seeing some of the sights and relaxing. After visiting church in the morning, we visited a beautiful tropical botanical garden and walked through the rainforest a bit. We went downtown for a bit, exploring the waterfront and the theatre at the esplanade. In the afternoon, we went up to East Coast beach, a nice white sand beach where we enjoyed the sun and the sand before heading back to the airport.

Back at the airport, I was on a flight connecting through Hong Kong – same as before, and about 15 hours later, I was landing in San Francisco International Airport about 2 hours clock time before I took off. I even managed to catch the last quarter of the Super Bowl after I landed!

The trip was over and it was nice to be back home and getting back to normal. Though it would take me almost a week to fully get over the jetlag and probably another week to get back into the usual routine. The memories would last a lifetime.