

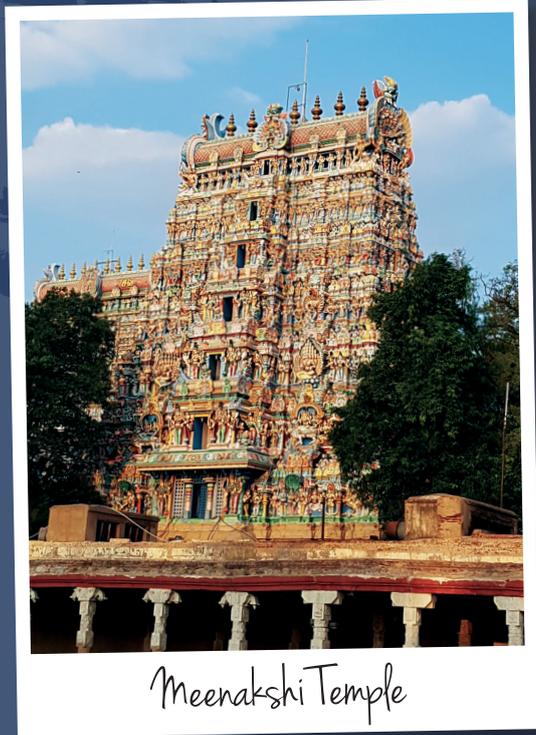
# TEMPLES, TEA AND TIGERS

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“For those of you watching in black and white the pink ball is next to the green.” advised the TV commentator. What Ted Lowe didn’t tell the watching millions was that the rules of snooker were drafted in Ooty, a hill station in the Southern Ghats of India. Ooty was favoured by the British Raj as a summer retreat during their occupation of India.

I set off from the coast on a sparkling new Royal Enfield, cruising alongside glistening rice fields, before rising up into the Ghats and cooler climes through regimented rubber tree plantations. Midday was brought to an abrupt halt by the loud and colourful masses of semi-naked pilgrims, all covered in multi-coloured dyes, on their way to the Sabarimala Temple festival. Quite a gathering.



Meenakshi Temple



Ooty Station

“We’re going to the funny farm.” the jeep driver explained. “Funny Farm?” I queried. “Yes sir, funny farm, where the funny bees are.”

It was quite a pleasant morning’s excursion and the honey was very nice but we were actually on our way into the Periyar Tiger Reserve. The chances of seeing tigers today though were zero. The screeching young India women ahead of me, insisting on group photos, had put paid to that and would have scared them all away.

From the Ghats it was a steep ride down onto the plains of Tamil Nadu and rising temperatures. The temple town of Madurai, 2,500 years in the making, was tonight’s destination arriving early enough to visit the magnificent Meenakshi Hindu Temple, home to the Gods Vishnu, Shiva and Parvati.

The large coconut palms provided welcome shade as I crossed the plains the following day, through small vibrant towns, each with their brightly adorned temples and colourful sculptures. From the plains the road up into the Western Ghats clung to the hillside, switch backing this way and that, until I was finally amongst the vast tea plantations, some of the largest in India and heading for Munnar.

**Read more overleaf...**

## TEMPLES, TEA AND TIGERS (cont.)

From Munnar the descent was delightful, through acres and acres of tea bushes, both above and below, the sun reflecting off their leaves like coins in a fountain. Poinsettia trees, with their bright red leaves lined the road in a guard of honour before dropping down through woodland game reserves and valuable sandalwood plantations. Towering cliffs, with tear stained faces from repeated monsoon rains stood aside as I arrived on lower ground. It wasn't for long though.



*The descent from Munnar*

A welcome 40km hairpin climb was ahead, up a well surfaced road to Ooty but the support jeep was missing and a return back down found it empty of fuel. While the driver was away I improved my aim throwing stones at monkeys, intent on robbing us of anything edible. They were all over the jeep and even amongst my motorcycle pannier but left empty handed as we soon refuelled. Finally we made our entry into Ooty, Queen of the Hill Stations and final stop for the Nilgiri railway.

Departure from Ooty took us back down the steep sided Ghat with first gear hairpin bends and multiple signs warning of danger. One sign read, "for free mortuary van dial this number..." but we arrived safely, in an expanse of brush and forest, amongst a vast Tiger reserve. The board on arrival proclaimed the sighting of a tiger only five days earlier so hopes were high. We enjoyed many wildlife sightings, including a close encounter with elephants and a six inch lizard dropping onto my arm but sadly no tigers. There are perhaps only forty tigers left in each of the half dozen or so reserves in India, so the chance of a seeing a tiger is low.

Bustling towns, chaotic traffic and overnights in relaxing lakeside resorts completed the ride. As the days wore on I had developed very bad riding habits. Overtaking and facing down oncoming traffic, overtaking on bends and even on the inside of large vehicles. All rather frantic and reckless but fun and exactly what everyone else did and fully expected. India is one of those countries where you have to look both ways, even to cross a one way street.



*Backwaters*

Sea Eagles, half the size of their northern cousins soared above the shimmering water, whilst dark Cormorants, silhouetted against the fading light, topped poles that marked a safe channel. Across the lake hazy coconut palms lined the far bank as the sun set on my final evening. I felt a little sad handing back the keys to the bike the previous day but all things must... but they didn't.

My return flight was interrupted by a stopover in Dubai, so I took full advantage, rented a BMW motorcycle and rode across the desert into Oman, two more countries to add to the list.



**Contact Gordon**

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