

A Business Tripp to Chennai (India)

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Had you ever been in Chennai? Had you ever been in India? You will never find these impressions, these flavors, these contradictions, these wonderful people, these beautiful women, this extraordinary atmosphere anywhere else on earth. You'll never forget Chennai.

The Arrival

It was Sunday at 6 am when the plane landed. It was a pity that we had a two and a half hour delay, but it didn't matter. We had arrived and I was eager to put my feet on the ground of Chennai again. I had visited it 14 months earlier and I could never forget it.

This time only around 300 people stood in the hall where all the passengers arrive, waiting to pass the passport control. It was hot – no, it was very hot. Although it was early in the morning, the temperature was already around 30 degrees Celsius and the humidity was around 70-80%.

You will be stunned the first time you visit Chennai. Everything in the arrival hall is hand made which means the people work slowly, write everything manually and that takes time. The Indians have time.

I had expected the passport control to take an hour and was happy when I was through after 45 minutes. Be prepared – it's a hard start for a visitor, but if you know this and expect the worst, it will soon be over. Be patient – one of the first lessons you should learn. Patience will help you in India.

Once you have passed the first hurdle you try to find your luggage. You can be sure that you will be through the passport control faster than your luggage arrives from the plane. You have to wait again. I wonder how they carry the luggage from the plane to the hall but it doesn't seem to be automated. It's simply too slow to be automatic. After one more hour I had my luggage.

First Steps On India's Ground

If you had never been in an Asian country, you will be impressed by the countryside that opens out in front of the airport. There are palm trees everywhere, thriving in the heat and humidity. When you leave Chennai's airport, you have the impression of seeing the movie "In 80 days around the world" or to be more precise, you think you are part of the movie. The cars look similar to the old cars in England. It's astonishing – they are white, round shapes and they look so comfortably old and traditional. Wonderful – back to history.

The Ride from Hell

I missed my hotel driver – I thought he would have already gone home after the many hours delay, but I heard afterward that he had still been waiting. The fact that we missed each other gave me a chance to do something I had wanted to do but would not have tried if I had been given a choice. Days later, as I write this article, I know that it was a marvellous stroke of luck or fate.

What happened? A friendly man asked me if I needed help. This is usual in India and I remembered from my first trip that there are always people offering to support you. I said “Yes, I need a taxi to the hotel XY”. He said “OK, just follow me”. I was happy because he talked English, which is often the case but you can’t always count on it. Don't worry, English will always help you and will always be sufficient. You will get what you want.

He took me outside, not to a taxi but to a yellow 3-wheel Autorickshaw. I had seen these strange things the year before and had always asked myself how I would get in these vehicles; I was too shy to try it by myself. Now this guy just took my luggage, put it into his vehicle and asked me to take a seat, all with a friendly smile in his face. After 20 hours travel everything was OK, but my heart was beating faster, and silently I was just praying that he understood the hotel name and that everything would be alright. I told him the price I was willing to pay and he simply said “OK”. Again, I could only pray that he understood me and rely again on fate.

You need to know that Autorickshaws are open. They have one wheel at the front, and two at the rear. They have a window of plastic at the front, but all the other sides – even where you sit – are open. I really mean open. There is no door, there is nothing. You just sit at a long seat and pray that everything will be alright. He turned on the motor and the ride from hell began. There are no signs in Chennai, or to be more precise, there are some signs, but nobody takes any notice of them. Everybody drives where he/she can; the fastest win; the smallest zigzag through the traffic. The Autorickshaws are the second smallest vehicles; only the bicycles are smaller. You can imagine that my driver was hurrying through the traffic jam as if the devil were chasing him. You turn left and right, fast and slow, always cutting in on someone. It was a wonderful, unforgettable ride. I was at the hotel faster than I would have been with a car and I will never forget this. As I wrote: I always wanted to take such a vehicle and simply didn't know how to hire one. Now I had ridden in one without having the chance to say yes or no, and it was OK. That’s typical of India: God had taken the decision for me. A strange and new concept for European people, but this attitude has advantages.

Women on Motorcycles

It's not common in Germany, but it's very common in Chennai: women driving motorcycles. Motorcycles are by far the most practical vehicles in Chennai. There is always a traffic jam and with cycles or motorcycles you are fast. It's also interesting to see how many people use motorcycles. Families use motorcycles as their family transport. One person (often the man) sits in the driving seat, with the youngest person in the family in front of him. Another child sits between him and the mother, who has either a bag or another child on her lap.

The Friendly People / The Friend of a Friend

Whenever you ask an Indian if s/he can tell you how to get something or how to go to somewhere, you can be almost sure that you will be put in contact with his or her neighbor or a friend. That is usual in Chennai, where relationships are based on close connections.

This custom has some interesting side effects. One day I asked at the hotel reception for an outside taxi. First, it was hard to explain to them why I did not want to have a hotel driver, but finally they gave in. They passed me to the mobility manager who asked me what I intended to do. I told him, and again said that I would like to get an outside (official) taxi. Eventually I had a friend of the mobility manager as a driver. That was not what I had asked for but he took the decision that his friend would be better for me than the official taxi driver. I will never know if he was right, but the

basic idea proved valid. The overall guideline is to try to make everything as comfortable as possible for friendly guests and if Indian people cannot do it personally, then they ask a relative or neighbour to make things possible. Hospitality is an attitude for Indian people.

The Poor and the Rich

Yes, it is true that many Indian people are still very poor and live below the poverty line. It is interesting to see that rich, medium rich and poor people live among each other. In Chennai you find streets with modern new buildings and new shopping centres and beside these buildings you find houses made of wood or straw. The poor and the rich people are together the society and they accept each other.

The Middle Class Establishment

In recent years a middle class has been established in Chennai. You can see many signs of the new class – if you walk through the streets with open eyes. The bicycles are replaced by motorcycles. More and more Indians wear jewels, but since jewels are not cheap in India relative to the income, only middle-class or rich people can afford to wear them. Since many people wear jewels I regard this as a sign that the middle-class has grown. Young people join health clubs. The advertisements on television are comparable to European advertisements. They show home gym equipment and promote the message that keeping in shape will somehow make life easier or more interesting.

All these are good signs and I hope that India, and Chennai in particular, has a fair chance to create and enhance the wealth of its people.

The Heat and the Wind

It was very hot in Chennai (around 40 degrees Celsius) but the regular and strong wind from the sea made the heat bearable.

The Beautiful Women

I agree that beauty is not objective but subjective. However, I doubt there is another country on earth where you will find such a high percentage of beautiful woman. It is difficult to describe what makes this beauty.

The wide-open brown eyes give such a warm feeling that you feel at home when you look into them. The soft pattern of the faces with well-shaped curves look simply unique. The colorful saris and churidhar are so wonderful. The soft cloth falls in flowing folds and moves in the wind. The traditional and unique clothes move at every step the women take and play around their bodies in an almost mysterious way.

The smiles, the laughs, the wide-open eyes, the saris and churidhas – all these found in a way into my heart and will stay there forever.

The Picture

One weekend two of my colleagues invited me to join them on a trip outside Chennai to a great

historical place which was also visited by many Indian families. We were having a rest in front of some caves when an Indian family arrived. Some of the children sat beside us, enjoying the rest. Suddenly my friends stood up without saying anything to me and, when I wanted to do the same, they asked me to stay there. They told me that the mother wanted to take a picture with me and her sons in front of this historical site. It was a real honour that they wanted to have the picture not without but with me. The important point of all this is the pure honesty in this story. The mother told her husband in the original Chennai language (Tamil; not English) that she would like to have a picture only with the German man (me) and her children, but she was too shy to ask. My colleagues understood Tamil and so they simply stood up and told her that it was OK, she could simply take a picture. I put my arm around the youngest boy and asked him if that was OK for him or whether I should take away my arm. When his mother told him that he could talk to me he agreed and he also gave me his name and we had some little conversation. It was a spontaneous and emotional situation.

The Private Invitation

An invitation from my colleague and friend to dine at his house with his family was a real honour to me. It was a wonderful evening. We took his motorcycle to go from our company to his house. The ride on his motorcycle in the late evening on overcrowded roads with 35 degrees Celsius outside and a laptop on my lap was the first unforgettable event. However, my friend did everything perfectly and we arrived at his home without any problem.

With a beating heart I met his wife and her cousin. I was unsure if they would understand my English and how we would communicate during the evening. All my worries were unnecessary – we spoke English and when we did not understand each other, then we found a way to make it understandable. Take it Indian style – don't worry but let things simply come.

The food was delicious, unforgettable and wonderful. We ate three main dishes and a dessert so that I had a broad overview of how typical Indian food tastes. It was fireworks for my palate. Each dish tasted different to the others and none tasted anything like the food I have eaten in restaurants or the hotel – everything was tastier and more extraordinary. If I close my eyes now I can still remember the taste, the smell and the atmosphere around the table.

When the great evening came to an end my colleague wanted to take me back to the hotel (of course not without asking me whether I wanted to stay the night in his house!). This is warm and honest friendship.

Time to Say Good-Bye

I knew that the moment would come but when it was time to leave Chennai, I was sad. I enjoyed the time in India and the time with these wonderful people. I had the same wistful feeling in my heart at having to leave something which I would like to enjoy longer, which I had had one year ago. It was a big surprise to have had a second chance to come to Chennai – and who knows, hopefully it was not the last time – hopefully I will have another chance to come back.