

# THE SCHOOL KIDS: INDIA

William Gray traverses steamy southern India – a dream destination he thought he'd never see in his lifetime, let alone with nine-year-old twins

## HOLIDAY REPORT CARD

The Grays

**PARENTS:** Globetrotters William and Sally

**KIDS:** Twins Joe and Ellie, nine

**FAVOURITE FAMILY HOLIDAY:** A fortnight in South Africa. 'It was the perfect adventure for mini-explorers (Joe and Ellie were five), with everything from paddling with penguins near Cape Town to riding on a steam train along the Garden Route. They even saw elephants and rhinos while on safari.'

**WORST FAMILY HOLIDAY:** Québec. 'Our flight was delayed, so we missed our connection and arrived in Québec horribly late and grumpy – the twins were just 22 months old. Jet lag kicked in at 4am for the first few mornings and the little monsters even learnt how to climb out of their travel cots.'

**THIS TRIP:** Easter holidays in southern India. 'The kids love adventure and we knew every day here would be different.'

Joe and Ellie weren't as fazed by their first experience of India's chaotic traffic as I thought they'd be. Perhaps it was all too familiar – a real-life version of *Super Mario Karts*, only played out with rickshaws, scooters and garishly painted trucks. It didn't take long for culture shock to kick in though.

At Kochi's waterfront, the first stop on our two-week tour of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, we stepped from the air-conditioned safety of our minibus into the sweaty swirl of South Indian street life. As the staring began and the hawkers closed in, I felt the twins' hands fumbling for mine. Our guide, Suresh, led us briskly to the famous Chinese fishing nets – giant cantilevered structures rearing above the shore like praying mantises. I tried to listen as Suresh described how the nets worked, but I was soon distracted, watching piles of fruit being heaped on rickety stalls, a bullock hauling a cart laden with sacks of rice, waves of humidity thick with the stench of fish... I wondered if it was all going to be too much for Joe and Ellie; that they were too young to cope with the intensity of India. It was one thing studying Tamil culture at school, but quite another to be right in the thick of it.

Several factors put me at ease though. Everybody loved children, and we had a fantastic guide who would often put a protective hand

on their shoulders and check they were OK. And then there was Kerala itself – easier going than most Indian states, and with an established tourist circuit. We were also on a polished (and not cheap) family tour, with a good balance between 'full-on' and 'laid-back'.

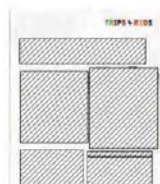
The following morning, for instance, we were driven to Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary – a soothing green balm after frenetic Kochi. 'Today I have 100 per cent satisfaction,' said guide Gireesh Chandran, after we successfully spotted the rare Sri Lankan frogmouth.

Satisfaction was also guaranteed further inland at Kodanad, where we waded in the River Periyar for a lesson in pachyderm husbandry. Wild elephants were once trained here for work in the timber industry, but now a rag-tag herd of rescued adults and orphaned youngsters enjoy the good life, including daily baths in the river. While the elephants flopped on their sides, Joe and Ellie scrubbed behind the animals' ears with coconut husks, suppressing fits of giggles as the jumbos created their own flatulent bubble bath. >

**Costume drama:** clockwise from far left, a Kathakali dancer in Kochi; the ubiquitous two-tone tuk-tuks; street procession in Tamil Nadu; Ellie in Kerala's serene Backwaters; Munnar's tea estates. Above, the Gray family – and very large friend

This hands-on approach proved to be the key to the trip's success. By day four, the twins had not only learnt how to wash elephants, and eat rice and dhal off a banana leaf, but they'd also tried tea-picking. Leaving behind the steamy coastal plain, we'd climbed 1,600m into the blissfully cool Western Ghats, where the hill station of Munnar sits snugly among the folds of emerald tea plantations. As with the elephant handlers, the tea-pickers were keen for Joe and Ellie to have a go; they took to it like ducks to (freshly boiled) water.

That's not to say the kids took everything in their stride, though. Barely an hour passed when they weren't brought up short by some startling aspect of daily Indian life – a whole family, baby and all, riding on a scooter, for example. And nothing could have prepared the twins (or me) for Madurai. Descending from the Ghats onto the dusty plains of Tamil Nadu, we lurched into the city amid a true maelstrom of fumes and horn blasts, black-and-yellow tuk-tuks swarming around us like angry bees. Our hotel provided momentary refuge before we set out, on foot, to the Meenakshi Temple. And that's when things started to go wrong. We had almost reached the temple's spectacular eastern *gopura* – a 50m-high gateway adorned with colourful figures of deities and mythical creatures – when we were swept up in the frenzied drumming, singing and dancing of a Kavadi procession. The heat and noise were crushing, but it was the sight of a man, swaying trance-like at the head of the crowd, with a three-metre-long metal spike inserted through his cheeks, that finally overwhelmed Joe. We laid him out in a patch of shade and

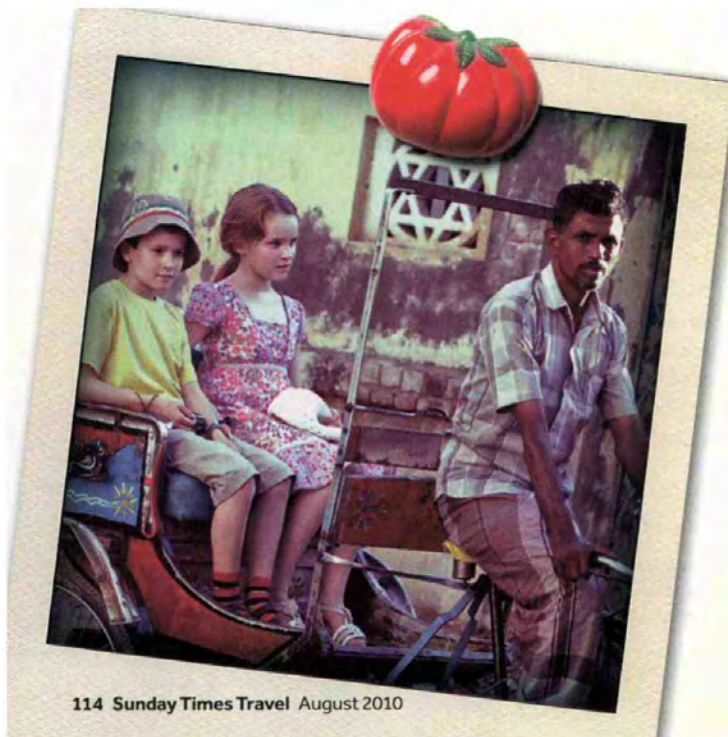


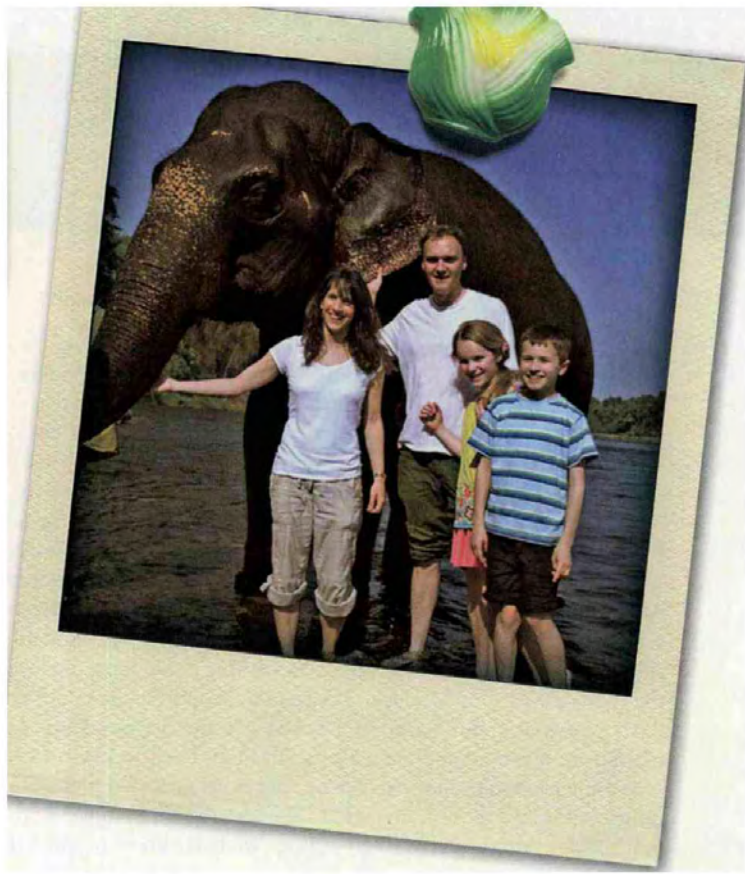
doused him with water until the colour returned to his face. He'd hated the typhoid injection before our trip – no wonder the sight of a Kavadi-bearer (enduring excruciating pain to gain merit from Murugan, the Tamil God of War) had pushed him over the edge.

The Meenakshi Temple was like an oasis after the manic scene. Suresh stayed close to Joe as we strolled through its colonnaded halls and gazed at elaborately painted ceilings. 'You OK now, Joe?' I overheard him say. 'You know, you see things like that in your life and your mind gets stronger.' Joe smiled weakly and nodded.

A couple of days later, we returned to the Western Ghats and Periyar National Park. Joe was back to his old self – our very own Mowgli, scampering carefree through the jungle, kicking footballs of dry elephant dung while Suresh pointed out the bear necessities. Heading back towards the Kerala coast, we stopped to meet families tending spice plantations, tapping rubber or moulding bricks from mud beside the road. An overnight houseboat cruise on Kerala's Backwaters provided a chance to witness local life at a more sedate pace. Then, for our final two days, we checked into a beach hotel and suddenly 'real India' was snuffed out by the more traditional sounds of children shrieking in the pool or complaining about being smothered in sun cream. There was something strangely comforting in the fact that we only had to step outside the hotel to find a tuk-tuk waiting to hurl us back into the magical mayhem. ■

**GET ME THERE:** **Exodus** (0845 863 9601, [www.exodus.co.uk](http://www.exodus.co.uk)) has a 15-day Kerala Adventure Family Holiday from £1,729 per adult, £1,539 per child (aged 5-11), with flights from Heathrow, private transport, 11 nights' B&B in hotel accommodation, plus one night camping and an overnight houseboat cruise (both on a full-board basis).

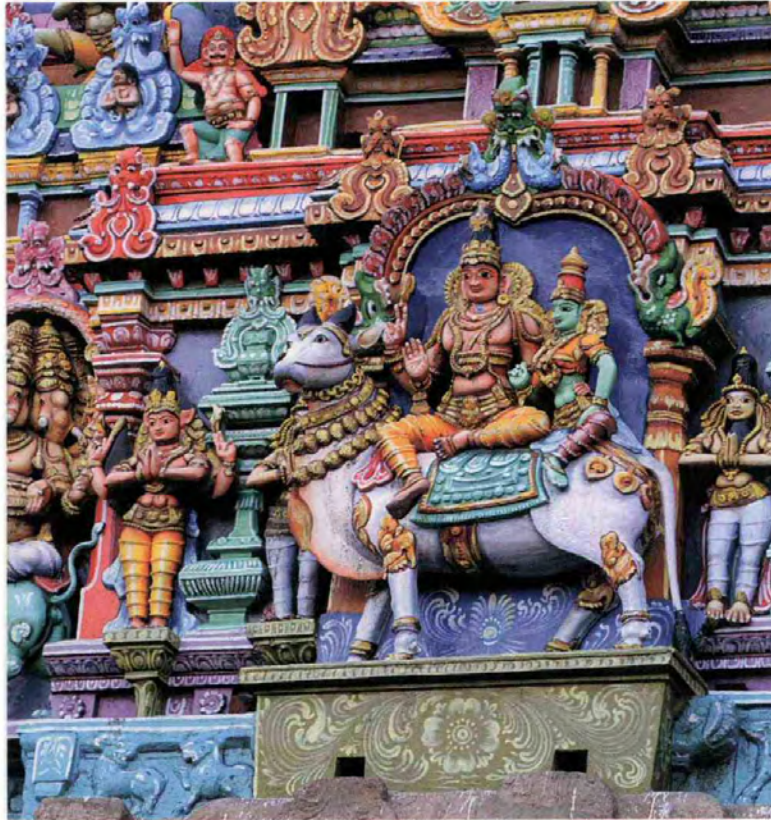




# TRIPS & KIDS



Pack your trunks: the kids will love watching elephants bathing in the River Periyar; candy-coloured temple deities; below, the twins hitch a ride



Joe and Ellie suppressed fits of giggles when the elephants created their own flatulent bubble bath





