

SHOBA NARAYAN

2006: THE YEAR IN TRAVEL

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What was your most memorable trip this year? The Yunnan province of China was amazing. We flew into Kunming and then drove up and up close to the Tibetan border. This is one part of China that is not cookie-cutter; native tribes are allowed to flourish. They preserve their heritage and flaunt ethnic costumes. Lijiang is a quaint World Heritage Site that looks like Old China. The closer you get to Tibet, the wilder the landscape becomes, with galloping horses and untamed pastures.

Your most memorable meal (not necessarily on the same trip)? Outside Bangalore, there is a restaurant called Grasshopper, run by a young couple trained in design. The chef, Himanshu Dimri, is self-taught and loves Japanese cuisine, which shows in his clean minimalist preparations that are international in flavor and big on ambition. There is no menu. You have to call ahead to reserve a prix-fixe seven-course tasting menu.

What was the most exciting thing that happened close to home? Native to the Western Ghat mountains of South India, Neela-kurinji (*Strobilanthes kunthiana*) is a shrub that blooms only once in 12 years. 2006 was one of them. The vision of entire mountainsides filled by this blue flower is unforgettable. And the blooms may last into 2007. Visit www.kurinji.in for details.

Did you stay in, or visit, a hotel that particularly wowed you? Maison Souvannaphoum in Luang Prabang, an erstwhile palace-turned-boutique hotel. Scarlett Hotel in Singapore is decorated like a boudoir—all pinks and purples, suede and velvet—completely at odds with Singapore's clean and staid image.

What place did you find overrated or disappointing? Angkor Wat was a disappointment because so much of the good stuff has been looted or carted off to museums. Since I grew up in India, I am used to giant temples with intricately carved stone sculptures. I was more affected by the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh. It had photographs of all the Cambodians killed by the Khmer Rouge and reminded me of Auschwitz, another place I visited that I probably will never forget.

What was your worst (or funniest) travel experience? Funniest: Coming face to face with an elephant calf at Mala Mala Game Reserve in South Africa. Neither of us knew what to do. The calf eventually took the lead and turned its rump on me. Worst: Spending the night in the Moscow airport. I was with a friend who used to work at the U.S. State Department. The immigration officials in Moscow took one look his passport, pulled us both aside, confiscated his passport, and jailed him with a promise that he would be deported the next morning. He begged me not to leave the airport until I was able to see him off the next morning. So I sat on the baggage belt, swigging vodka and chatting all night, until he was escorted on to a U.S.-bound plane.

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