

Monsoon memories from India's magical downpours

► Cover The country is at its most spectacular during the rainy season. And Shoba Narayan discovers, it's cheaper to visit now, too.



Moody skies shroud the magnificent Taj Mahal.

Shoba Narayan
Sep 05, 2009



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There is a scene in Mira Nair's sumptuous film, *Monsoon Wedding*, in which the Delhi sky opens to let out a torrential downpour that is the Indian monsoon. That scene, and its accompanying song, *Kawa kawa kawa*, captures the many moods of the monsoon; some of them clichés: gutters becoming streams; drenched women in yellow saris running for cover; vermilion powder streaking down from a man's forehead.

Two things unite all Indians, be they rich or poor, rural or urban, Hindu or Muslim: an innate desire to be hospitable and a love for the monsoon. The monsoon is a meteorological event, yes, but for Indians, it is also a seasonal life giving cosmic force. People pray for it; festivals are celebrated around its occurrence; movies and music are inspired by it. Along with spices and colour, the smell of the monsoon is part of the Indian collective unconscious, evoking nostalgia in even the most hardened souls. The Indian monsoon, for anyone lucky enough to witness it, is a magical memory.

The sad truth is that this year's monsoon has been playing hookey, and it's late arrival has affected everything from the price of gold to the price of staples such as rice and dal. The word monsoon originates from the Arabic mawsim, which became the Hindi mausam (meaning weather) and later, in English, monsoon. Usually the period of abundant rain accounts for 80 per cent of the country's annual precipitation but this year it's a hit and miss affair, and overall rainfall is well below average. Across India, images of withered farmers looking hopefully at the sky have adorned the front pages of newspapers. Some, facing failed crops and financial ruin, have committed suicide.

My earliest memory of it was when I was seven or eight. Our extended clan had gathered at my grandparents' rambling red-roofed ancestral home in Kottayam,

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Kerala. About a dozen of us cousins were playing hopscotch and gilli-dhanda in the courtyard outside, sweating under the searing afternoon heat. Suddenly, the sky lightened as if the sun was releasing all of its light before the dark clouds appeared and unfurled their fury. Rain encompassed us like a waterfall. We watched our parents, aunts and uncles rush out to the courtyard to collect drying clothes and red chillies left out in the sun on newspapers. "Come in," they shouted. "Don't stand in the rain." It was my cousin, Raju, who started the dancing. He was older, about 15. Pretty soon, all of us kids were jumping on muddy puddles and dancing. And then, the unthinkable happened. My youngest uncle ran out and started dancing with us. Older, sterner uncles followed, as did careworn aunts whose only interaction with us was to say, "Eat your vegetables." Most shocking of all was the sight of our elderly grandparents, who allowed themselves to be dragged out by my shrieking parents. Soon, about 30 of us were singing and dancing, twirling each other in the soft mud. This is why Indians love the monsoon. It turns adults into children and brings back memories of surprise and delight, against the humdrum haze of an Indian summer childhood.

The monsoon confers more than life-giving rains. It creates images, common to all Indians. A turbaned farmer kneeling to kiss the parched earth as the first raindrops pelt his back. White-uniformed chauffeurs in Ambassador cars pulling off highways near Goa because they cannot see beyond their ineffectual windscreen wipers. A human pyramid of a hundred drenched men reaching for a clay pot during Janmashtami celebrations in Orissa. Grinning faces arched upwards towards the pouring rain and the giant elephant-god during the Ganesh festival in late-August in Mumbai. Eating hot pakoras and drinking masala chai in a dhaba outside Delhi, watching young girls chase upside down umbrellas carried away by the wind. Uniformed schoolchildren wading through Kolkata streets. This is the Indian monsoon, which like a Sanskrit verse or a Zen koan is both image and experience; magic and mystique; and arguably one of the things that define India.

Within India, several locations can lay claim to having the best monsoon experience: Mumbai, Kolkata, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Goa, Orissa, as well as Delhi and the north-east. Only the desert state of Rajasthan doesn't get the full extent of either the south-west monsoon from June through September or the north-east monsoon from October through December. Neither do the two cities on the Deccan - Bangalore and Hyderabad.

The south-west monsoon is the more dramatic of the two: all bells and whistles with huge cloudbursts accompanied by thunder and lightning. As my friend said, "It arrives like an Indian bridegroom with a light-and-sound entourage." After the first few days, the monsoon (like the bridegroom) settles down into a steady rainy rhythm. The north-east monsoon is softer and gentler, giving up the bulk of its rain only when it reaches all the way down south to Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where it too, puts on a show. From that vantage point, Kerala is the best place to experience the Indian monsoon, followed by (in my opinion), Goa and Mumbai. Each offers a different flavour.

Goa's monsoon is about beaches washed clean of tourists; languid locals enjoying what they call *sussegado* or a laid back life with swigs of potent feni, pork vindaloo and *bebinca* cake. The Sereno Spa at the Park Hyatt is as Sybaritic a spot as any to take in the monsoon. Spread over 11,000m, and offering a full range of Ayurvedic and other treatments, the spa sent me into a happy haze after only two days. After a divine four-handed massage, one of the smiling therapists told me that Russian charters take full advantage of the low monsoon rates by bringing in planeloads of Muscovites for two to three week stays. Indeed, Russian was as prevalent as Hindi and English around the pool when I went in late August.

Monsoon in Mumbai is quite frankly, ugly. The city becomes grey, waterlogged and congested. Tempers fray; traffic is clogged; harassed, wet commuters pack delayed trains. The only civilised spot is Marine Drive where monsoon rains send waves crashing against the boulders lining the boardwalk. With huge windows overlooking the Arabian Sea, the InterContinental Mumbai on Marine Drive offers the best views - better than the Taj, Oberoi and Four Seasons, all of which offer decent vantage points to view events. Last June, when I checked in, I had a 20-minute complimentary massage on arrival and I spent much of my time sipping tea in my room, watching the many moods of the sea through billboard-size windows. At night, friends and I would congregate at Dome, the rooftop bar, huddling in sweaters against the raging wind.

My in-laws, who live in Trivandrum, Kerala, claim that the monsoon is best experienced in there. Indeed, the entire state takes time out during the season to undergo Ayurvedic treatments, presumably because the moisture in the air softens the body and makes it more receptive to therapy. I once asked the Ayurvedic doctor at Somatheeram, a beach resort an hour outside Trivandrum why a steam bath doesn't serve the same purpose.

"Madam," he answered in his clipped Malayali accent. "A steam bath is like a microwave. It makes things warm but only temporarily. The monsoon Now, the monsoon is like a marinade. It softens and conditions the body, alters its composition, makes the juices and toxins come out." Kerala's Ayurvedic resorts list July and August as the lean season, and offer discounted rates. For locals however, this month, called Karkadagam in the Malayalam calendar (July 15 to August 15) is the time to indulge in Ayurveda, as prescribed in the ancient texts written by Charaka and Susruta. Rates are higher but visitors travelling from October to early December can also experience a monsoon 'marinade' thanks to the short and surprisingly heavy north-east monsoon. Ideally, you would spend at least two weeks getting the Indian version of "the cure" and indeed some renowned health resorts like Soukya near Bangalore and Kalari Kovilakam in Kerala will not accept guests for shorter periods. Even larger hotel chains get remarkably intransigent when it comes to messing with Ayurvedic treatments. I remember begging the doctor at the Taamra Spa at the Taj Malabar years ago for a pizhichal, a wonderful treatment in which about six ladies (two on each side, one at your head and another by your feet) massage you using specific hot oils that are mixed for the monsoon according to body type.

"No Madam," said the spa doctor firmly. "You have just checked in. We have to prepare the body with rejuvenation massages for two days before trying the pizhichal treatment. It is too cooling. You will get a cold if you go for it right away." All my arguments about the hotel making more money by giving me the more-expensive pizhichal treatment had no effect. Neither did my plaintive pleading that this was my only chance to try the treatment since I was leaving the country the next day.

Recently, I went on an Ayurveda tour of Kerala's spa resorts, emboldened by low monsoon rates. I flew into Trivandrum, the state capital and drove out to the Leela Kovalam. Its beautifully appointed Club rooms offer spectacular views of the sea. Standing on its vertiginous balcony felt like being on the prow of a ship. Waves crashed on the rocks below dusting my face and hair with foam. Misty rain softened my body as the Ayurvedic doctor said it would. The Leela's spa offers sanitised Ayurveda - its oils don't smell pungent and the oil is rubbed off with towels after each massage. An American friend who was appalled by the overdose of oils in traditional Ayurvedic resorts loved this Ayurveda-lite approach but purists might be better served elsewhere.

The Taj Green Cove, also in Kovalam and a 20-minute drive from the Leela was where I headed next. The Taj group has standardised its spas under the brand name, Jiva (meaning life). My favourite Jiva spa, which also happens to be a

great monsoon getaway is at the Taj Fisherman's Cove outside Chennai, along the Coramandel Coast. The best part about Fish Cove, as it is called, are its cottages, which are right on the beach. Tamil Nadu's monsoon season is October through December (the north-east monsoon) and I spent an entire weekend sitting on the veranda outside my cottage, watching the rain play with the waves and reading the entire Harry Potter series along with my daughters.

In Kerala, the Jiva spa at the Taj Green Cove in Kovalam teaches esoteric yoga techniques such as yoga nidra (yogic sleep), meditation and pranayama (breathing) techniques that are rarely found outside ashrams. I like the Jiva brand because everything from the linens to the aroma oils is organic. For my monsoon sojourn, I travelled from the Taj Green Cove to Somatheeram, a little further south of Kovalam in the village of Chowara, along the Malabar Coast of India. Somatheeram sits on a lush green cliff and the herb-laden walk to my cottage offered great vantage points to watch dark clouds roll over the sea. The spa here uses traditionally mixed oils that are a far cry from the aroma massages of Bali. Ayurvedic oils smell of gooseberry, cloves, neem and nameless herbs. Their strong smell is - to mix some sensory metaphors - an acquired taste.

One interesting thing about Kerala's Ayurvedic resorts such as CGH Earth is that most of them are owned and managed by Syrian Christians who seem to have mastered this ancient Hindu health form. Having stayed at several CGH Earth resorts including the one in Lakshadweep, I would pick Coconut Lagoon right on Vembanad Lake as the perfect place for a monsoon holiday. When I visited some years ago, Paul McCartney and his then-wife, Heather Mills had just come and gone and the guest book was full of their gushing responses, both to each other and the beautiful location.

One afternoon, my husband and I took a houseboat (kettu vellam) out into the lake. Vembanad Lake is huge by Indian standards; and clean enough to jump in for a swim. For a couple (honeymooning or otherwise), spending a night on this mist-shrouded lake in rain-lashed privacy would qualify as one of the top romantic getaways in the world. *Shoba Narayan is the author of Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes, published by Random House* travel@thenational.ae

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