

WALK THE STREETS TO KNOW B'LURU'S REAL CORE



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very now and then, my friends want to move to Bangalore. They are attracted by its weather and vibrant tech scene. Since I write books and articles about this city, they often ask for advice of various sorts: good schools, cost of living and, most often, where to live. For the last question, I have a stock answer: I describe various neighbourhoods in Bangalore and then offer my final tip: live near a bazaar. Unless you are the kind who doesn't like bazaars, in which case my advice would be the opposite: live in a gated community.

Cities claim your heart in many ways. Some are flamboyant and classy, with many world-class museums, buildings and performing-arts venues. Others play up their age with ancient alleys and historical landmarks. Some cities, though, try to walk the fine line between doing all of the above. Bangalore is one of these cities. The region it stands on is objectively one of the oldest, not just in India but on Earth. Bangalore stands atop a Precambrian geologic rocky terrain formed 4.3 billion years ago. Lalbagh rock, that all of us clamber upon, is part of this geologic time. When you stand on top of it, you are touching one of the oldest parts of Earth. Bangalore city, on the other hand, is layered. It does not have the historical heft of neighbouring Chennai with its Chola kings and co-

lonial remnants. It does not have Mughal history and grand buildings like Delhi. It is not as vibrant in its performing arts venues as Mumbai.

It does not have the Colonial buildings of Kolkata. Bangalore is a bit of a khichdi with all of the above and none of the above.

What makes Bangalore unique? Well, for one, its weather. The second anomaly is that it is not near a river, which most global cities need in order to set up their civilizations. Bangalore became a settlement because it was at the crossroads of the North-South East-West trade routes. Today, this city has been overtaken by technology, first with IT and now with its startup culture. If you want to see Bangalore before it became synony-

mous with software, you have to go to its bazaars. It is where all the wheeling and dealing happens.

On nearly every weekday morning, I have a routine. I wear a simple cotton saree and walk to Russell Market. I may not necessarily enter the market, but all along the way are vendors who I know and have cultivated over the many years that I have lived in Bangalore.

There is the dour vendor on Dharmaraja Koil street who only sells banana leaves, a lady who sells greens and know their medicinal properties, a flower guy who can custom-make arrangements for parties as long as they are Indian-style garland-type ones. I chat with them, haggle for vegetables and learn new things.

To see the city that you live in as a spectacle, object of visual interest and social interaction requires that you be a flaneur: that old French word which connotes loitering without a purpose. There are several cities in the world that lend themselves to this sort of approach to life in the city. Most European cities, for instance, let you wander. In India, this is difficult largely because of the trifecta of heat, traffic and pollution. In Bangalore, though, this is possible, particularly if you live in densely populated areas like mine. Shivajinagar is full of narrow alleys and lanes that connote a time before vehicles.

The trick is to choose unchang-

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ing eternal sights that are not linked to any event or season as your touchstones. In my area, this means choosing old temples to goddesses like Muthyalamma, Angala Parameshwari and Mariamma. It means the St Mary's Church and the

Juma Masjid. It means the old attar sellers who have populated the place forever. And, of course, Russell Market where a rotating cast of garland makers, butchers and vegetable vendors ply their trade. With that said, I want to give you specific instances

of how to walk through your neighbourhood with a flaneur's approach.

Look for cobblers and tailors as you walk. Stop for a moment to peer into their shops. Some will have boots and buttons, some will have men sitting on the floor and doing intricate embroidery.

Punjab tailors or LB Prakash in Commercial Street, for instance, is where I go to get intricate work done. You can squat on the ground next to the sequin guy or the embroiderer and discuss French knots and roses with them. Isn't this luxury?

Look for gully cricket. Still happens in small lanes all over Bangalore. If you are in the mood and have time, join in. It is a great way to know the neighbourhood.

Look at street names wherever you are in Bangalore. In Shivajinagar for instance, there is a Fruit Street, Murphy Road and Ashur Khanna street. I wonder about these names and these people. Who were they and how did they influence Bangalore?

In that question lies a new exploration. Being curious about your neighbourhood lets you peel open the layers hidden in plain sight. They let you both be a tourist in your own city and also get to know the place that you call home a little better. But for all this, the necessary but not sufficient condition is that you must walk.