

THE QUEST FOR ANCIENT CHRISTIANS IN TROPICAL SOUTH INDIA (via Singapore) JANUARY 15 – FEBRUARY 9/2009

Since the dawn of recorded time, India has been a holy land of the world. The acclaimed British television commentator, Michael Wood, has aptly termed India an 'empire of the spirit'. The peoples of the Indian subcontinent have for millennia been preoccupied with life beyond the material. India has given birth to two of the world's major religions: Hinduism and Buddhism. However, few western Christians would readily identify the country as an ancient Christian heartland dramatically evangelized by the first-century Apostle Thomas. Come to India on this exotic itinerary which engages multiple cultures of effusive religiosity and climaxes in the quest for the ancient churches established by the Apostle Thomas in tropical South India.

Day 1 / January 15

We depart Calgary (09:10)/Vancouver (12:25) via Air Canada and Singapore Airlines.

Day 2 / January 16

We arrive in Singapore in the late evening and transfer to our hotel after meeting with our guide and clearing airport formalities. **Overnight at Swissotel Merchant Court Hotel (4 star).**

Day 3 / January 17 / Singapore

After a buffet breakfast at our hotel, we embark on a half-day city tour of Singapore, a cosmopolitan hub of Asia populated by a diversity of races – Chinese, Malay and Indians, joined by workers from western nations. It bears the nickname 'The Garden City'. Our itinerary features Little India, a small cultural foretaste of all that awaits us in India, Chinatown where the old and the new converge, the President's Palace, Empress Place and the 128-acre Royal Botanic Garden where the region's first rubber trees native to Brazil were propagated in 1877. The afternoon is free for the leisurely exploring of the city on your own or perhaps an excursion to Sentosa Island, one-time pirate haven and British military base. Lunch and dinner on your own. **Overnight at Swissotel Merchant Court Hotel (B).**

Day 4 / January 18 / Singapore

Following a buffet breakfast, there is free time for rest or to experience more of Singapore's delights. We depart from the hotel in the early afternoon to catch our flight to New Delhi. Upon arrival in New Delhi, we will be met, garlanded and transferred to our hotel for dinner. **Overnight at Hotel The Park (BD).**

Day 5 / January 19 / New Delhi

After breakfast, our destination today is some of the most notable highlights of New Delhi, India's capital since 1947. The city's history, layered in time, extends back three millennia. An ancient saying predicted that whoever built a new city at Delhi would lose it. Our focus will be Old Delhi, where we'll visit Raj Ghat, the spot on the banks of the Yamuna River where Mahatma Gandhi was cremated after his assassination in 1948 and Jama Masjid, the largest mosque in India, an architectural extravagance of Shah Jahan begun in 1644 and completed in 1658 CE. A rickshaw ride takes us through Chandni Chowk, Old Delhi's congested main thoroughfare which buzzes with market commerce. The afternoon features main sights in New Delhi commencing with Humayun's Tomb constructed in the mid-16th century by the Persian born wife of Humayun, the second emperor of the Mughals. India Gate, the city's monumental, memorial arch, bears the names of approximately 90,000 Indian soldiers who died fighting for the British Crown in the First Great War and other conflicts of the same time. The National Museum

will orient us to the abundance of India's historical and cultural treasures from various regions across millennia of time. The Qutub Minar, the tallest Muslim minaret in the world testifies to the invasion of Islamic armies from the north which brought India's ancient history to an end in the 12th century CE and initiated the struggle for the soul of India. In the late afternoon you will enter the meditation-inducing, peaceful tranquility of the Bahai Temple, a stunning creation completed in 1986, set among pools and gardens and constructed in the form of an unfurling white lotus symbolizing spiritual enlightenment. **Overnight at Hotel The Park (BD).**

Day 6 / January 20 / Delhi / Agra

After breakfast, we drive for 5 hours into the state of Uttar Pradesh to Agra, an industrial city of over one million people on the Ganges plain beside the Yamuna River, which in the mind of the visitor is synonymous with India's most famous building, the Taj Mahal. In the afternoon we tour the Agra Fort, a massive red sandstone construction begun by Emperor Akbar in 1565 and subsequently expanded by his grandson Shah Jahan who used his favorite building material, white marble. The colossal double walls of the fortress rise over 20 meters. The exquisite beauty of the Taj Mahal in the late afternoon sun defies description. One of the wonders of the world, this immaculate mausoleum, built for love, remains as spectacular as when first built in 1631-1653 CE by 20,000 artisans from India and Central Asia. It will leave you breathless. We return to Delhi by evening. **Overnight at Hotel The Park (BD).**

Day 7 / January 21 / Goa

After breakfast at our hotel, we will transfer to the airport to connect with an Indian Airlines flight southwest to Goa, the former Portuguese enclave on the Arabian Sea where we start to acclimate ourselves to the sun-kissed, palm-fringed ambiance of tropical South India. Here we enter paradise. Upon arrival in Goa, we are transferred to the luxurious, beachside Cidade De Goa Resort Hotel for an afternoon/evening of relaxation. **Overnight at Hotel Cidade De Goa (BD).**

Day 8 / January 22 / Goa

We embark on a full-day tour of Goa's Portuguese heritage. The Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama, hoping to connect with the legendary Christian monarch Prester John, arrived in South India on the Malabar Coast in 1498 'seeking Christians and spices'. In 1510, the inimitable Alfonso Albuquerque captured Gove from the Muslims (subsequently abbreviated to Goa) making it the first region of India to come under European control since Alexander the Great had departed in 326 BCE. A seventeenth century Arch of the Viceroys (1597) commemorates Vasco da Gama's arrival in India and contains his statue. A short walk away, the Church of St. Cajetan, modeled on St. Peter's in Rome, features both a distinctive dome and some intriguing non-European elements in its interior decoration such as cashew nuts carved into the pulpit. In the afternoon, we visit Our Lady of Pilar Church, built by the Capuchins in 1613 on the site of a temple devoted to Shiva overlooking the city of Gowapuri. In the chapel of the nearby modern Pilar Seminary reached by a narrow winding road are impressive stained glass windows crafted in Germany from the paintings of a Goan artist. The centerpiece depicts Our Lady of Pilar. Late afternoon, we return to our hotel for relaxation. **Overnight at Hotel Cidade de Goa (BD).**

Day 9 / January 23 / Goa

Today we undertake another full day of examining Goa's Christianization process, the story of which is told in its many churches. You'll enjoy the way we do today's itinerary in a strolling fashion. St. Catherine's Cathedral (named after St. Catherine of Alexandria d.307CE) which took 80 years to build is first on our agenda. It was consecrated in 1640 and stands magnificently higher than any church in Portugal. The one surviving tower house holds the Golden Bell, cast in the 17th century and of Inquisition infamy. The church interior contains no less than 15 side altars

as well as a stunningly gilded main altar. To the west of the Cathedral is the Church of St. Francis with its fine decorative frescoes, hidalgos' tombstones on the floor paving and wooden paintings depicting scenes from St. Francis' life. In close proximity to the Church of St. Francis is the Church of Bom Jesus, 'Good' or 'Menino Jesus' known chiefly for the tomb of St. Francis Xavier, the Apostle of the Indies (1503-1552 CE) and the most distinguished follower of Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). The incorruptible corpse of Francis Xavier has remained enshrined in the basilica since his death but not without relic picking of its parts by miracle-seeking pilgrims and curious clerics. We conclude with the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary built in 1526 which affords panoramic views from the same terrace from which the conquistador, Albuquerque, viewed the decisive battle for Goa in 1510 which occurred across the Mandovi River. Before returning to our hotel, we sample one of Goa's jeweled beaches.

Overnight at Hotel Cidade de Goa (BD).

Day 10 / January 24 / Goa / Cochin (Kochi)

Following breakfast, we travel to Panjim, also known as 'Panaji' 'the land that does not flood' which became the capital of the state of Goa in 1843 after the port of Old Goa had silted up. The movie 'The Bourne Supremacy', starring Matt Damon, was filmed here. The atmosphere is easy-going and we'll saunter through the backstreets of the old quarter Fontainhas to view some ochre, pale yellow, green and blue Portuguese heritage homes to get an aura of centuries gone by. At the elevated heart of the town is the Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception built in 1541, of special significance to sailors arriving from Lisbon who stopped here to pray and give thanks for safe arrival before proceeding to Old Goa. This afternoon our odyssey continues further south via Indigo Airline to Cochin (Kochi), a prime tourist destination in the magical state of Kerala, once called 'God's own country' by the Beatles. Upon arrival, we'll be transferred to our hotel for dinner and an evening conversation. **Overnight at Hotel Abad Atrium (BD).**

Day 11 / January 25 / Cochin (Kochi)

Today our journey enters the fascinating world of Cochin (Kochi) which emerged in the 14th century CE as the chief port of the Malabar Coast (as known to the Romans) attracting Christian, Arab and Jewish settlers from the Middle East. The elegant mechanism of Chinese fishing nets, used by the locals for over 600 years, takes us back centuries into Cochin's past and gives the waterfront an imaginative character. A walk through historic 'Jew Town' brings us to the Pardesi 'White Jew' Synagogue which dates to 1568. Some historians assert that 'Black Jews' first settled here in 587 BCE, fleeing the Babylonian occupation of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. A contrary claim makes the first Jews to arrive here in the 11th century BCE, members of King Solomon's trading fleet. By the 1950s however, most of Cochin's Jews had immigrated to Israel. We continue on to the Church of St. Francis, the first church built by Europeans in India, the exact date of which is not known but perhaps it was built in the 16th century. Vasco da Gama was buried here in 1523 but his body was later transported to Portugal. The earliest interior tombstone inscription dates to 1562. Today the church belongs to the Church of South India. We'll also visit either a pepper or ginger warehouse, mindful of the lucrative spice trade which brought successive empires of the west to Kerala. The afternoon is free. Tonight, we attend the Kathakali Dance show. Kathakali which literally means 'story play', is a dance drama which combines the fine arts of literature, music, painting, acting and dance in its reenactment of sacred Hindu myths. Cochin (Kochi) is one of the few palaces in the country where one can see the Kathakali performed. **Overnight at Hotel Abad Atrium (BD).**

Day 12 / January 26 / Cochin (Kochi) / Guruvayur / Chavghat / Kodungalloor / Paravoor (Kottakavu) / Nedumbasserry

This morning we begin our quest for the Apostle Thomas as we soak in the beauties of the tropical Kerala landscape. Three hours driving brings us to Guruvayur, Kerala's most important

Vishnu shrine which attracts a constant flow of pilgrims. Of interest is the outdoor elephant grove where elephants are cared for by their personal mahouts. The over 50 elephants participate in ceremonial processions during the annual 18-day sacred festival of Ekadashi. During the festival of Ulsavam the elephants participate in an elephant race. After lunch we continue for 15 km to Chavgat to visit the Palauoor Church, believed to have been established by the Apostle Thomas in 52CE when the village of Palauoor was a Brahmin settlement. According to tradition, four Brahmin families accepted the Christian faith and were baptized here by Thomas. Following the Thomas trail, we continue another 30 km to Kodungalloor (known also as Muziris, Shinkli and Cranganore), a key port in the pepper trade for the Romans. Tradition claims that it was here that Thomas, brought by monsoon winds, landed and preached the gospel c.52 CE. Kodungalloor is esteemed to be the 'Cradle of Thomas Christianity' which is commemorated by a pontifical shrine. Another 15 km takes us to Paravoor (Kottakavu), one of the earliest settlements of Brahmin migrants to Kerala. Arriving during a great Hindu festival, Thomas proceeded to preach here for a year and baptize over 1700 persons. A wooden cross planted by the apostle survived in the church (built in the 9th century) until the 19th century. The day ends at Nedumbassery. **Overnight at Hotel Abad Atrium (BD).**

Day 13 / January 27 / Cochin (Kochi) / Malayattoor / Munnar

We leave Cochin (Kochi) for a 20 km drive to climb Malayattoor Mt (only slightly aerobic!), a pilgrim center which is visited by millions of pilgrims during the season of Lent and on the Sunday after Easter. The St. Thomas Church at the top of the hill stands above the cross that Thomas erected during his days of intense prayer. At the base of the hilltop is a statue of Thomas erected in 1938, perched on a rock to protect it from the menacing trunks of elephants. After lunch we ascend for 3 hours into the higher altitude world of the tea plantations to Munnar (elevation 1524m) which still has vestiges of British colonialism. Munnar was the summer resort of the former British administration of South India. Known as a 'hill station', it is situated in the Kannan Devan Hills, making it a favorite location for honeymooners who crave its greenery and cool air. En route, we will check out the natural origin of many of our common household spices in a visit to a local spice plantation. **Overnight at T and U Hotel, Munnar (BD).**

Day 14 / January 28/ Munnar / Kumarakom

We enjoy a morning cultural excursion to one of Munnar's vast, rolling tea plantations to observe an industry over a century old. The memory of Munnar's setting amid dramatic mountain scenery, crisp mountain air and manicured tea plantations will not quickly dissipate. We pick up the trail of Thomas with a 5 hour drive to Kumarakom via Kokkamangalam where we stop at St. Thomas Church. This church, another major pilgrim center, dramatically tells the story of Thomas' saga of faith through a series of outdoor vignettes constructed in a 'Galilee' atmosphere. According to tradition, Thomas spent 1 year here and baptized 600 persons. **Overnight at Coconut Lagoon, Kumarakom (BD).**

Day 15 / January 29 / Kumarakom / Kottayam

This morning we cruise the monsoon-fed backwaters of Kerala, a lush, exotic garden of paradise. The extensive network of waterways in Kerala covers 560km. We arrive by water at Kottayam which has a long history of Syrian Christian settlement. It is strategically situated between the backwaters and beautiful Lake Vembanada to the west. The longstanding presence of Syrian Christians in Kottayam is reflected by the presence of two 13th-century churches on a hill 5km from the city center. Of special interest are two 8th-century Nestorian stone crosses with Pahlavi and Syriac inscriptions at the Valliapalli ('big') church as well as handwritten evidence of a visit by former Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. Nearby is the Cheriapalli ('small') church, covered with paintings perhaps done by a 16th-century Portuguese artist. After lunch we will tour the Old Orthodox Seminary, the setting for the emergence of the 19th-century 'Luther' of South India,

Abraham Malpan. He was on the seminary faculty and emerged as a pivotal figure in the birth of the 'Mar Thoma Syrian Church' which attempted to converge Orthodox and Protestant traditions of Christianity. **Overnight at Coconut Lagoon (BD).**

Day 16 / January 30 / Kumarakom / Nilakal

Get ready for more of the tropics! We drive 100 km to Thiruvalla for lunch and check in at our hotel. This sets the stage for an adventurous afternoon by jeep to the site of the now extinct, one-time prominent, ancient merchant town of Nilakal (Chayal) which fell into decline in the 10th century and was destroyed in 1314CE. Our goal is the St. Thomas Church-Ecumenical Pilgrimage Center which lays claim to being the first ecumenical church in the world and was built atop the 'Hill of God'. The modern restoration of the ancient church at Nilakal in the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary for elephants and tigers has been a focal point for Hindu-Christian cooperation. **Overnight at Hotel Basotta, Thiruvalla (BD).**

Day 17 / January 31 / Nilakal (Thiruvalla) / Kollam (Quilon)

In the morning, we drive 70 km to Niranam, a small village in southern Kerala with a rich tradition of literature, cultural exchanges and religious harmony. Roman coins have been found at Niranam testifying to its commercial importance in antiquity. Its Christian community is among the oldest of any in the world as it grew out of a missionary journey of the Apostle Thomas. We will visit St. Mary's Orthodox Church. We continue to Mavelikkara (20 km) to visit the Parumala St. Thomas Church and then on to Kollam, eulogized by Marco Polo as one of the leading trade capitals of the Old World. Kollam was used as a port by the Phoenicians, Romans, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, and British. As the second of Thomas' churches founded along the seacoast, Kollam (Quilon) was a favorite destination in the 4th century of Persian Christians escaping persecution in their homeland, thereby making Kollam one of the oldest Christian dioceses in Asia. We will visit the Thomas shrine at the Church of Our Lady of Purification and the recently built Church of the Holy Family, whose magnificent stained-glass windows depict biblical scenes contextualized with Indian motifs. The last stop of the day will be at the Shrine of Our Lady of Velamkani. **Overnight at Hotel Nila Palace (BD).**

Day 18 / February 1 / Kollam / Tivandrum (Kovalam)

This morning's 85 km drive brings us to Tivandrum (Thiruthanathapuram). The unpretentious, leisurely capital of Kerala deserves some time. We will savour a few of its cultural delights: the Napier Museum (1855) with its extensive collection of bronze and stone sculptures and wooden carvings; the charming two-storied Puthen Malika palace built in traditional Keralese style; the Sree Padmanabha Swami Temple that holds the deity of the royal family of Travancore and qualifies as one of India's great temples; and lastly, the Koyikkal Palace Numismatics Museum where 374 Roman coins are held. Dinner and overnight is at Kovalam on the Arabian Sea, where you will fall asleep to the sound of the pounding surf. **Overnight at Hotel Samudra, (BD).**

Day 19 / February 2 / Tivandrum / Kanniyakumari

The morning is free to relax on the beach! Mid-afternoon, we will drive 100 km to Kanniyakumari in the state of Tamil Nadu, the southernmost extremity of India-'Land's End' and of special spiritual significance to Hindus. En route we will stop at Thiruvithancode to see the mysterious 'half-church' of Thomas, so named for a variety of possible reasons. Upon arrival, we will check in to our hotel and prepare for a spectacular sunset boat tour of the Vivekananda Rock Memorial where the Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal meet. Many Hindu pilgrims were killed here by the 2004 tsunami. The Rock Memorial honors the Hindu reformer and wandering monk, Vivekananda (1862-1902 CE) who swam out to the rocks to meditate on the syncretistic teachings of his dead guru, Ramamkrishna Paramahansa. A second nearby rock

statue, 40 m in height, is of the Tamil saint, Thiruvalluva. **Overnight at Hotel Singaar International, Kanniyakumari (BD).**

Day 20 / February 3 / Kanniyakumari / Madurai

Today we will visit more sites in Kanniyakumari, including the Gandhi Memorial designed as a modern imitation of an Orissan Temple. It was meticulously designed so that the sun would strike the spot where the ashes of Mahatma Gandhi were laid before being immersed in the sea at noon on his birthday, October 2. After lunch, we will drive north 235 km to Madurai on a modern highway, stopping en route at Tiruchendur ('beautiful holy town' in Tamil), a Hindu pilgrimage center whose main attraction is the Subrahmanya Temple, one of the six sacred abodes of the Tamils' favorite deity, Lord Murugan, Shiva's son. He presides over a spectacular sandy beach where the breakers crash on the shore. The day ends in Madurai. **Overnight at Hotel GRC Regency (BD).**

Day 21 / February 4 / Madurai

We will spend the day touring Madurai, one of the oldest of South Indian cities located on the banks of the Vaigas River with possible genealogical links to the Indus River Valley civilization of antiquity. Its name derives from a Tamil word meaning 'sweetness'. Long hailed as the 'Athens of the East', the city today is characterized by some of India's worst urban chaos and economic disparities. We'll visit the mighty Meenakshi-Sumndareswarar Temple which is among India's most important Hindu pilgrimage centers, visited by up to 15,000 persons on any weekday. The massive gopuras surrounding the complex are honeycombed with colorful mythological figures who communicate Madurai's connection with Hindu myths. The afternoon affords either an opportunity for rest or an optional trip to the Mahatma Gandhi Museum which has as one of its exhibits the blood-stained garment in which Gandhi was assassinated. The evening may provide a post-dinner opportunity for a lecture on Indian Christianity at Tamil Nadu Theological Seminary. **Overnight at Hotel GRC Regency (BD).**

Day 22 / February 5 / Madurai / Chennai

Early this morning we are transferred to the Madurai Airport to connect with our Jet Airways flight to Chennai (Madras). Upon arrival, we will be transferred to our hotel, a converted movie studio. The film studios of Chennai churn out more movies (about 900) than any other city in the world. In the afternoon, we connect with the Apostle Thomas through visits to the Cathedral of St. Thome in Mylapore and St. Thomas Mount, both of which are major stops on the Thomas pilgrimage trail. His saga climaxes here. The neo-Gothic Cathedral, the successor possibly to two earlier Nestorian churches, contains his relics and the alleged location of his tomb. A must-be-seen museum on the premises houses numerous artifacts germane to the Thomas story. St. Thomas Mount with Our Lady of Expectation Church at the top is said to be the actual site of the Apostle's martyrdom. As India's fourth largest city, Chennai does not lack things to see. We will be selective and visit St. Mary's Church, the oldest surviving Anglican Church in Asia, to see the high personal cost of empire and Fort St. George, completed as a trading post by the British in 1640. Now a museum, inside is an array of portraits, regimental flags, coins, weapons and an art gallery which hark back to the British occupation of Madras, providing some background to the history of the Raj. **Overnight at Hotel Green Park (BD).**

Day 23 / Chennai / Mahaballipuram / Pondicherry

The day begins with a 65 km drive to Mahaballipuram, a World Heritage Site as of 1995, and badly hit by the 2004 tsunami. Famous for its stone carvings which showcase the talents of local artists more so than serving votive purposes, its greatest cultural treasure is the picturesque Shore Temple, one of India's most photographed monuments. The waves once lapped at its base. In

the afternoon, we proceed another 110 km to Pondicherry to check in at our hotel. The rest of the day is free. **Overnight at Hotel Annamalai International (BD)**

Day 24 / Pondicherry

Breakfast is followed by a tour of this idyllic seaside town, the former capital of French India but best known to Canadians as the setting for the award-winning Canadian novel, *The Life of Pi*. Our itinerary takes us first just outside the town to the economically self-sufficient Auroville Ashram, the most New Age place anywhere in India, founded in 1968 and inspired by 'The Mother'. About 1300 persons, mostly non-Indian, live here in communes. The Matri Mandi, 'dwelling place of the mother', a high-tech, globe-shaped meditation center, stands at the heart of the site to unify the community. Back in Pondicherry, we will visit the French Wall Memorial; the Government Museum with its bizarre display of French colonial furniture; and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Paper Factory, to observe the laborious process of hand-making decorative paper sold in tourist spots all over India. The afternoon is free to relax and watch the world go by at a seaside café. Perhaps you will see a tiger floating by on a raft?! **Overnight at Hotel Annamalai International (BD).**

Day 25 / Pondicherry / Chennai / Singapore / Vancouver / Calgary

Alas, we must leave India today. After breakfast we drive 175 km to Chennai to catch our international flight to Singapore/Vancouver/Calgary.

NOTE:

- all hotels in India are 5-star
- tour price includes 2 meals/day (**BD** - breakfast and dinner) in India
- tour price does not include lunches