

Bradt travel guides

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Serendipity... or Perhaps Destiny

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The tuk-tuk driver declares, "Madam, there are NO buses on Sunday: Sunday is holiday day."

It's 7:30 in the morning. I'm in Kerala, India's sunny, southern state, negotiating with a driver to take me from Varkala North Cliff to Temple Junction, about two miles, as I need to catch the early bus to Kovalam.

Lovely, my Indian landlady - it really is her name - at Hotel La Maison de Varkala, assured me that Sunday is a normal day here, so I trail back to the hotel for advice. Lovely gets feisty. "Why these bloody guys always cheating and be giving Europeans wrong information! Come, we find good guy." As suspected, the tuk-tuk man had hoped I'd fall for his ploy and pay him 1,200 rupees for a suicide, two-hour ride on the main highway.

Eventually, I board a modern, air-conditioned bus. The fare to Kovalem is 94 rupees!

It's a day return trip to collect my belongings from the Kovalam Ashram, where I'd been on a Christmas yoga retreat.

I'd left London on a dark, December morning, with the resolve to make some life changes. To become fit in mind, body and spirit would be a good start I'd thought. The ashram's therapy had included Ayurvedic treatments, simple food... and no alcohol.

To return home, after the retreat, to a gloomy, January London held little appeal. A month of sunshine would be restorative. Now I'm freelance, I can write anywhere.

I retrieve my case and decide to risk a tuk-tuk ride back to Kovalem bus station. My driver's modus-operandi is to dodge oncoming traffic while overtaking everything. Terrified, I hang on, avoiding looking ahead. Over his shoulder he shouts, "Madam, I take you to train - bus not safe for woman!"

The ticket office clerk barks, "Madam, you must be hurrying, Varkala train leaving now, platform 2." There are no elevators. In 40-degree heat I haul the case up the stairs, then, clumsily bump it down the other-side, just as my train is pulling out. Damn, now what!

Abruptly the train stops: a plump, Indian woman, in a fluorescent green sari, has fallen out of an open carriage door. She's sprawled on the platform, laughing! Train stewards, in brilliant white Kurtis, are leaning out, gawping and yelling. The woman's relatives, there seeing her off, are shrieking and laughing too as they push her back on.

The pandemonium unnerves me, yet, the urge to jump onto the train is strong. Luckily, my heavy case stops me, because without warning the train lurches forward. A shouting relative adds to the mayhem. He's running beside the moving train, waving the hand-bag she'd dropped in her fall. Someone leans out to grab it.

Feeling stranded, I silently curse the tuk-tuk driver for thwarting my bus plan. Then, an angel appears. A small, wiry man, dressed in the red shirt uniform of a coolie (porter) demands, "Where going?"

"Varkala," I respond weakly. With my heavy case on his head he bounds up the stairs. In the terrific heat I try to keep up.

At a far platform, he boards a train, chooses a compartment and shoves my case under a seat, saying, "Mumbai Express, one stop Varkala, go, one hour!" He holds out his hand and I fish out a fifty rupee note. Holding my gaze, he slowly shakes his head.

A middle-aged Indian man, by the window, looks up from his laptop. "It's because you are European: one hundred should be ok." he says politely. I pay up.

Feeling stingy, old and exhausted, I slump into a seat. I tell him I'm from London. He tells me he studied English Literature and film studies at University College London. Then, opening up, he continues. "Since my divorce, I often come here to stay with my sister. She runs an elephant sanctuary. It's my sanctuary too when work gets too crazy." I perk up at this and tell him about my friend in London who raises money to rescue ill treated elephants. "I promised her I'd visit Kerala sanctuaries." I say.

Warming to his good looks and intelligent demeanour, I ask, "What is your work?"

"I'm a producer in the Mumbai film industry." Reading my mind, he adds, laughing, "Art house films not Bollywood." Then, "I wonder... you know, we need a European woman for a small part. Would you be interested? It would be very well paid."

I pull out my phone. "Lovely, it's me. I've had a hellish day, but something interesting has come up. I'm on the Mumbai Express. Maybe it's serendipity... or destiny, but I've met someone really nice. I'll tell you more later. Look after my things. I think, after all, I'll be staying on in India."