

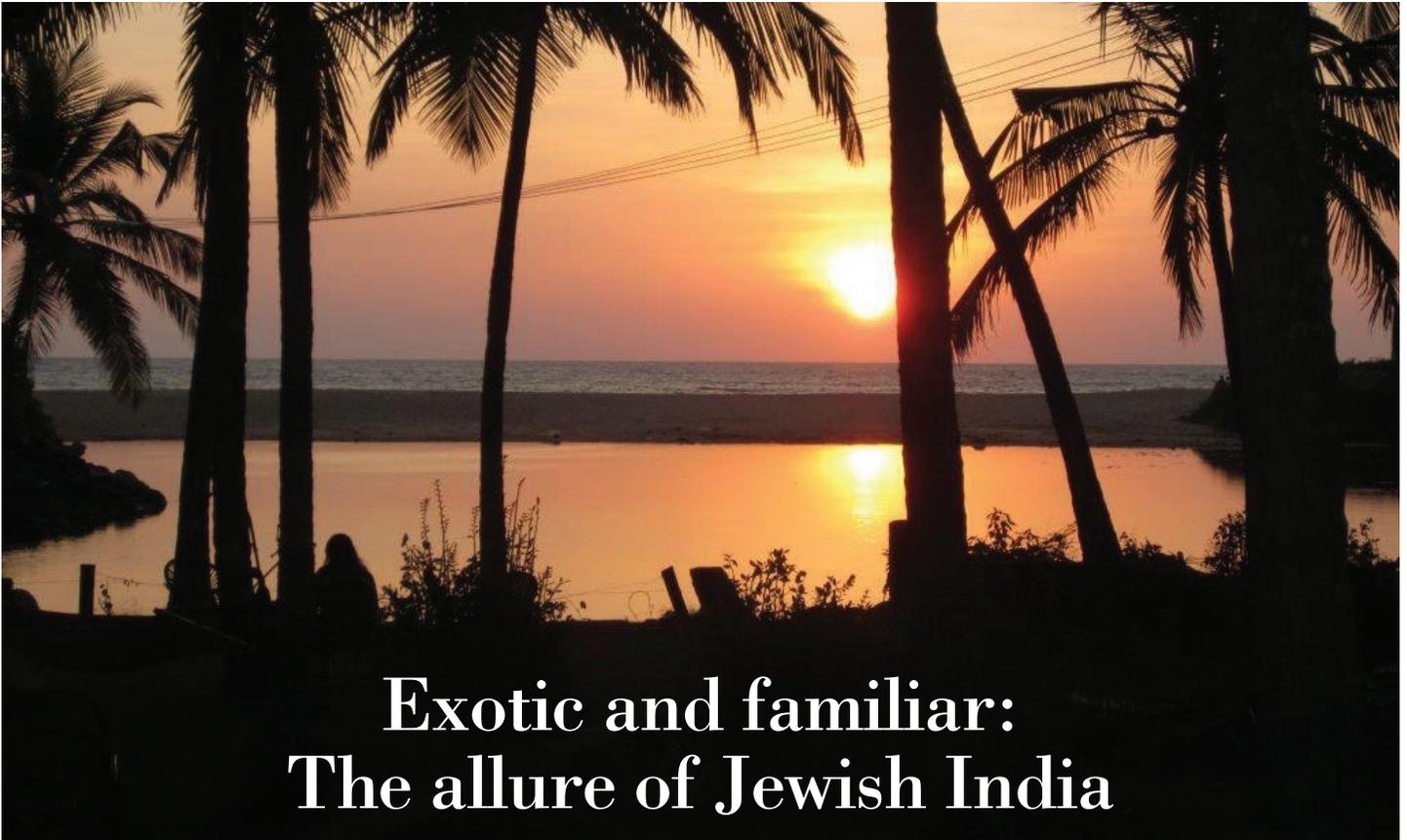
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Exotic and familiar: The allure of Jewish India

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I have been thinking about India since I was last there in the 1980s: the colors, the spicy aromas, the natural beauty in contrast to the mass of humanity and the warm, friendly people. I didn't want to go on a tour. I wanted to meet people. I had no idea that Jewish people live in India or of their history. Then last April, Dr. Shalva Weill of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a leading expert on the Jews of India, spoke in Scarsdale. A cultural anthropologist, she has lived among the Jews of India and in the Jewish Indian communities in Israel. I dreamed of going to India with Dr. Weill. In January, my dream came true.

About 5,000 Jews remain in India. Their history is fascinating. They came at different times from Israel, Portugal,

Iran, Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen. They have lived there for more than 2,000 years. Longtime Scarsdale (now Hastings-on-Hudson) residents, Iris and Howard Burkat, who have been traveling to India and learning about the Jews for

The synagogue in Alibag is pastel pink, with hot pink and white trim, two stories tall, set in a large courtyard.

several years, organized everything through their company, Burkat Global, LLC. They will be running another very similar trip in January 2015 (www.burkatglobal.com/journeys).

Our 15-member group was from the U.S., Israel, Germany

and England, with an age range of 24 to 80. There were always many perspectives; not everyone was Jewish. The pace was brisk, but not taxing. The weather was hot, but not debilitating. It never rained. A few in the group were slow walkers, but

they never had a problem.

We began our exploration on the Konkan Coast, a few hours south of Mumbai in Alibag. A few steps off the bus, we spied a sign on the wall of a three-story building: "Hotel Sudarshan, Bar, Restaurant and Permit Room,

Special Panjabi and Chinese Dishes, Israel Lane, Alibag." The address heightened our senses and a closer look revealed a Star of David carved above the door of a house, another in the ironwork railing at a window. Turning the corner, we spotted the synagogue in the distance.

This Konkan synagogue is a long way from the distinguished modern architecture of most Westchester synagogues, or the classical religious edifices we think of from the first half of the 20th century. The synagogue in Alibag is pastel pink, with hot pink and white trim, two stories tall, set in a large courtyard. There is a low stone wall around the property and an arch at the entrance with an elaborate metalwork gate with stars of David and a menorah at the top. The four

Continued on next page

Exotic and familiar: The allure of Jewish India

Continued from previous page

columns that hold the arch are painted in vertical pink and white stripes with hot pink capitals. We have arrived in Jewish India.

Built in 1848, the Alibag synagogue is a community center and place of worship for a congregation of Bene Israel Jews who claim to have come to this area around 175 B.C.E. when traders from ancient Israel were shipwrecked off the Konkan coast of India. They lived in villages here and later migrated to Mumbai. Most of the Jews who lived in India emigrated to Israel when the Jewish state declared independence in 1948.

The town of Alibag is slightly decrepit but bustling. The main road has several two-story tile roofed homes, a few cast concrete three-story apartment houses and a series of shops. One of these is a food stand where two women in saris wait to be served something out of a large aluminum pot. Another shop is selling cleaning supplies and hardware.

Farther along, there is a table partially in the street displaying garlands of orange, red and white flowers and several of the ubiquitous snack shops that are all over India, with brightly colored strips of connected chip bags hanging across the front; probably terrible for our bodies, but spicy and crisp.

There are lots of the narrow little delivery trucks that fit two abreast in a lane of traffic, bicycles everywhere, scooters and motorcycles usually carrying two or more people. At the corner, five little goats have stopped to look around. On closer inspection, we notice that the store they are standing near has been turned into a pen, with wire mesh across the front, but they have been let out or have escaped.

In the side street is a large concrete tub, faced with tile, about 6 by 8 feet and 3 feet deep. Three women are doing laundry there. One moves the clothes around the tub with a plastic stick, another works on a stain with a cake of brown soap, and a



Iris and Howard Burkat waiting for Shabbat at Paradesi Synagogue, Jew Street, Jew Town, Cochin, India. Top, Kannur, India: view from guest cottage.

third is beating a piece of clothing against a low concrete wall.

As I am standing there, another woman arrives with a huge load of laundry wrapped in a cloth, balanced on her head. Along the way, we have seen women carrying baskets, plastic containers, bags of rice and even a large wooden shelf on their heads. They are all dressed in brightly colored saris. The men wear dull colored western clothes-pants and short sleeved collared shirts. Everyone wears flip-flops. There are satellite dishes on the tops of even the poorest houses. Most of the houses seem to have been recently painted in pastel colors — pink, periwinkle blue, mint green — always with a different trim color, a deeper pink or blue or sometimes red or orange.

We visited several other synagogues along the coast and stopped in one village in the coconut groves where, as was quite common, Jews used to run businesses pressing coconut oil, the lifeblood of the south Indian diet. Most of the Jews there have moved to Israel. At the coconut oil press, there is a mezuzah at the door, two hand prints on the outside wall (symbol of Passover), and stars of David decorate the building. The oil press runs on electricity now, instead of by a bullock.

India had a large group of what they called “Baghdadi Jews” who came to Mumbai from Iran, Afghanistan, Syria and Yemen, beginning in the 1500s, many of whom went back to Israel at mid-century. In Mumbai itself, we had dinner with distinguished members of the Jewish community and visited several of their synagogues. Whether at dinner, or visiting a synagogue, it always struck us how similar the names were to the people we know in the United States, how many doctors, lawyers and accountants were members of the community, but how Indian everyone looked.

From Mumbai, we traveled south to Kochi (still called Cochin by locals) in the southern state of Kerala. Jewish traders settled along the southern coast of India after the destruction of the second temple in Israel in 72 A.D. There is evidence that Jewish traders came to this area a thousand years earlier. We visited the archeological site at the ancient port of Muziris, where pottery has been found dating back to ancient Israel, as well as ancient Egypt, China, Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. Everyone wanted India’s spices!

Sephardic Jews also came to Kerala after 1492 and are known as the Paradesi Jews. We went to their synagogue in the Mat-

tancherry area of Kochi for Shabbat services, which were conducted by one of our group members. Following the service, there was an Oneg Shabbat, Hebrew for “Joy of Sabbath,” a gathering of Jews in a synagogue or private home to express the happiness inherent in the Sabbath. We celebrated with Indian beer, since we could find no wine, along with a touch of Westchester. Our tour leaders, Iris and Howard Burkat of Hastings-on-Hudson, had brought along kosher (and gluten-free) baked goods from By The Way Bakers in Hastings and had been saving them for this special night.

Kochi is the most manageable of Indian cities that I have ever experienced, made up of a peninsula and several islands. There are ferries between the islands, as well as buses, but the best way to get around is by tuk-tuk, or auto rickshaw. These are everywhere and the drivers are friendly and helpful. A long ride in one of these yellow and black three-wheeled vehicles costs much less than \$1.

Our time in Kerala also included visits to Hindu temples, boating on the backwaters, shopping and yoga. Our hotels and retreats were lovely; the vegetarian food was very tasty, very varied, nothing like you have in most American vegetarian restaurants. While everything was certainly highly flavored with Indian spices, it wasn’t scary hot at all.

I cannot just sit still on a beach. I like to be learning and meeting all kinds of people. My trip to south India fulfilled my dreams of connection and discovery. I met warm and interesting people, learned much about ancient history, and saw virtually undiscovered Jewish architecture and design. I practiced yoga under a mango tree, by a rice paddy and on the beach at the Arabian Sea. I ate delicious, subtly flavored foods and was delighted by the colors and textures of daily life.

For 3,000 years, Jews have been making the same voyage for similar reasons.