

BENGALURU, Bangalore, Garden City, Silicon Valley of India. Take your pick. They all accurately describe this dynamic city. Bengaluru is a modification of a Kannada term that literally means 'town of boiled beans' because, according to an ancient legend, a village woman served a bowl of beans to a hungry king. It was called Bengaluru as long ago as the ninth century, but when the British made the town their regional administrative base in 1831, they renamed it Bangalore. In November 2006, a resolution was passed to reinstate the old name, Bengaluru. It is a city of amiable contrasts – greens goes hand in hand with concrete, traditional bungalows share a boundary wall with plush residential complexes, and simple coffee bars brush shoulders with jazzy coffee lounges. That's Bengaluru for you.

CITY OF CHANGE

I WENT TO BENGALURU – still known to the world by its former name, Bangalore – out of curiosity. Bengaluru's strategy, begun in the 1970s, to develop an area called Electronics City has been hugely successful. Dozens of high-tech companies have set up shop there, notably Wipro and Infosys, spurring explosive population growth and making the city the headquarters for Information Technology (IT) in India.

Bengaluru has become synonymous with Business Process Outsourcing (aka call centres) and the spectacular rise of the Indian economy. It is one of the fastest growing cities in Asia and the poster-child for 'shining India.' The city has been nicknamed the Silicon Valley of India and it has effectively replaced the Taj Mahal, turbans, tigers and tea as a symbol of India. The word 'Bangalore' has even entered the lexicon: "I called to get my computer problem fixed and I got Bangalore."

And Bengaluru's economic boom is not restricted to IT: it also includes the aerospace, aviation and automotive industries, the biotechnology sector, rose exports and silk manufacture.

But aside from having a temperate climate, a secure location in the interior of the country and a history of heavy industries manufacturing, Bengaluru seems like an unlikely spot for such expansion and modernity. It was a sleepy colonial town known for

its lush gardens, inviting climate, traditional values and a large retirement community.

Before my arrival in Bengaluru, I really couldn't imagine it. Would it look like the India I knew from my extensive travels around the country; or more like Canada, the country I had left behind?

I had heard it had the best climate and worst traffic in India; the greatest gardens and most modern corporate campuses. Most of all, I heard that it was a potent symbol of what India could be and, some said, was indeed becoming: an economic powerhouse based on a talented, educated and English-speaking work force particularly well-suited to the inventive, resourceful and entrepreneurial requirements of booming high-tech industries.

So, I arrived with curiosity and spent a week exploring, eating, shopping, meeting people and trying to sense the essence of Bengaluru.

WELCOME TO 'OLD BANGALORE'

DURING MY WEEK IN Bengaluru I asked many different people the same two questions: How is the city changing? And, where should I go and what should I see? Many of the comments were about the clash of old and new; and many of the recommendations were designed to give me a taste of what the city was like before the onset of the high-tech boom.



Over the course of my week in Bengaluru, I had breakfast at the legendary Maravalli Tiffin Rooms (MTR), lunch at Koshy's Restaurant and a walk in the Lalbagh Gardens

So, off I went, recommendations in hands, to explore the city. I visited traditional markets, heritage restaurants and famous gardens – along with droves of Bangaloreans. I enjoyed feeling that I was part of the traditional, everyday life of the city, and not at some awkward, fake tourist attractions. In fact, tourist attractions in Bengaluru are in very short supply, which is just as well because Bengaluru has something better: Old Bangalore. If you go plan to go to Bengaluru, get used to this phrase, "old Bangalore." You will hear it a lot.

On my third morning in Bengaluru, I got up before dawn and took an autorickshaw to Malleshwaram, a flower and vegetable market in one of the oldest parts of the city. I arrived at that poetic time that is neither dark nor light; neither day nor night. The stalls were just opening for business, their bright, happy wares artfully piled on simple tables. The only concession to modern life seemed to be the naked light bulbs that emitted a weak but welcome glow. The atmosphere in the market was unhurried and friendly, the streets were empty and I could have been in a small town anywhere in India.

From there I went to the century-old city market in central Bengaluru, which spills mounds of cilantro, coils of flowers, pyramids of coconuts and other fresh produce out of a well-worn Victorian-era building.

These markets are not tourist attractions. They really do supply the city's populace (seven million and growing) with flowers, fruit, vegetables, dairy products, meat and fish – and they take place virtually every day.

After walking around the entire market, I had really worked up

an appetite and went to Brahmins' Coffee Bar for an idli breakfast. Brahmins' may be literally a tiny hole in the wall – you have to stand outside on the footpath to eat – but it is an institution in Bengaluru and there were many people eating breakfast on their way to work. My simple meal of *idlis* and tea was hot, fresh and delicious.

Over the course of my week in Bengaluru, I also had breakfast at the legendary Maravalli Tiffin Rooms (MTR), lunch at Koshy's Restaurant and a walk in the Lalbagh Botanical Gardens. I enjoyed all of these experiences. They were perhaps not as spectacular as visiting Humayun's Tomb in Delhi, zipping along Marine Drive in Mumbai or seeing the Victoria Memorial in Kolkata, but they had their own unmistakable charm.

Sitting in both Koshy's and MTR, I felt I had walked back in time. I was reminded of black-and-white photos from the 40s of Indian intellectuals gathering in coffee houses. These restaurants have very deliberately resisted renovation and modernisation. The walls are probably the original colours, dull with the patina of age; the menus serve the same specialty dishes; and the patrons obviously enjoy the familiarity of tradition.

HOW GREEN IS YOUR GARDEN

IN LALBAGH BOTANICAL GARDENS, I felt I had walked back even earlier in time, to the Victorian era. This garden sits imperiously in the centre of Bengaluru like a dowager queen. It was the one attraction in Bengaluru I was familiar with, and looking forward to seeing. Bengaluru has long been known as Garden City, and Lalbagh is the empress. Originally planned by Haider Ali in 1760, the garden features 150 varieties of roses and a glass pavilion, made by the British

I arrived at Malleshwaram, a flower and vegetable market,
at that poetic time that is neither day nor
night when the stalls' bright, happy wares were being artfully piled for sale



PORTRAITS FROM LIFE: (Clockwise from far left) Happy faces in a traffic jam; selling earthenware; the Malleshwaram market



MARIELLEN WARD

Though centrally-located, the Casa Piccola Cottage is a tranquil sanctuary with a leafy garden and an outdoor cafe – I made the Cottage my base during my stay

years on a whim. The property had been abandoned for several years and it was in a state of severe dilapidation. It was originally built in 1915 when Bengaluru was home to a sizable British community of mid-level civil servants, and was known for years as 'Mary Flanagan's house.' Apparently, Mary Flanagan was a British woman who lived in the house until she was in her 80s, and was known for driving around town in a 1928 Ford driven by a chauffeur who was in his 70s.

Benjamine and Bhushan bought the house from a descendant of Mary Flanagan's, and they almost razed it – until, luckily, their builder said it could be saved. They preserved the exterior and completely renovated the interiors. The Oberois have done an excellent job of both retaining the property's charm, and heritage value, while transforming it into a haven of comfort for guests. Though centrally-located, it is a tranquil sanctuary with a leafy garden and an outdoor café. I happily made it my home base during the week I was exploring the city.

Benjamine is not just passionate about preserving a slice of old Bangalore; she is just as passionate about making her guests feel as comfortable as possible. She goes out of her way to help her guests, even when their requests are unusual or difficult – such as the painter who was looking for holy trees, or the French woman working with an NGO in Nepal who was looking for an international school for a Nepali boy.

The international schools were all too expensive, and the boy ended up living with the Oberois, going to school in Bengaluru and becoming a third son to them. Benjamine is also passionate about the non-profit work she does for several south Indian NGOs, and

is a believer in change. "People need to have heart in whatever they do... and things will change," she said.

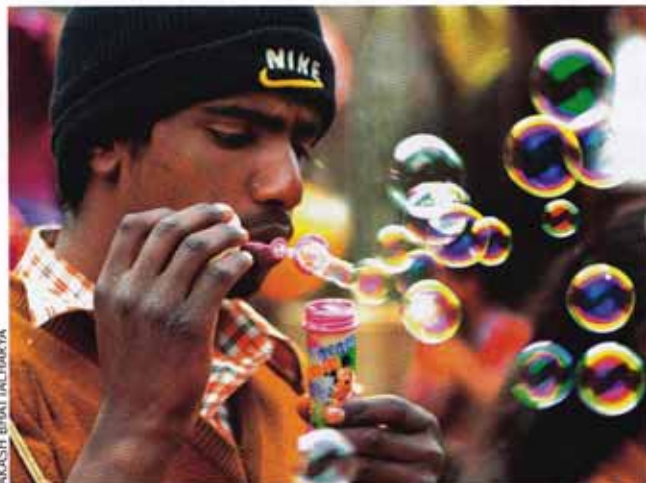
THE BENGALURU MASH-UP

THE CASA PICCOLA COTTAGE story is representative of a Bengaluru phenomenon: Two "outsiders" with completely different backgrounds move to town, marry and restore a heritage property – both preserving a piece of municipal history and giving the property a new, active role to play in the life of the city. Whereas in other, more traditional parts of India, there is much more homogeneity, in Bengaluru "mash-ups" seem to be quite common.

Farheen, who works at the Taj West End Hotel, is a Muslim woman from Bombay married to a Rajput Hindu. Sudha, a young woman I met while waiting for breakfast at MTR is a Bangalorean Hindu married to a Punjabi Christian (though they have in common the fact that they have both worked at BPOs).

Before arriving in Bengaluru, I met a fellow travel blogger on Twitter, and then met up with her in person for lunch at the excellent Coconut Grove restaurant on Church Street. Freya breaks just about every stereotype you may have about Muslim women: she wears jeans, has a short spiky haircut, works in social media and drove her motorcycle for eight months across India on a solo travel quest.

Isabel is a travel writer and blogger from Toronto (my home city) who now lives in Bengaluru. I met her first online, and then in person when she joined me for lunch at Koshy's. At my hotel, I met two middle-aged British women who had come to Bengaluru to find the graves of their grandparents.



Arun Pai of Bangalore Walks believes that 'Bangalore is more of a concept than a tourist city' – he gives the story behind the attractions, and presents the intangibles

Bengaluru's colonial past and current economic boom has lured people from all parts of India, and from around the world, and created a thriving, diverse and cosmopolitan mix that is rare in many parts of the country.

EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

THE TRANSFORMATIVE BENGALURU spirit is, surprisingly, also exemplified in a landmark *saree* store, Mysore Saree Udyog. I was told I must go to the store, as it is both an institution, and a great place to shop for silk (one of the chief products of this part of India, of course).

The founder of Mysore Saree Udyog, Pukhraj S. Talera, came from Rajasthan to Bengaluru in 1929 and opened a 10x12 ft store – the first Marwari to open a silk *saree* store in the city. Today, his grandsons Anil and Aditya Sancheti run the business, preserving the founder's commitment to quality, integrity and honest dealing, while moving with the times.

The company still has only one shop – but it is modern, clean, spacious and bright. On multiple floors, the store is overflowing with every kind of quality silk imaginable: embroidered, beaded, plain, raw; in sarees, dress material and other products. They attract a wide range of clients, including celebrities – and even sell their products internationally, via an ultra-modern online service.

The company is installing a studio on the top floor that will act as a cyber-show room. Using a webcam and a video internet call, they will be able to show their products to clients in far-flung locations. Their intention is to make the customer feel she is actually in the shop.

I asked Anil what his grandfather would think of all these changes, and he replied: "He would be happy, smiling." Anil explained that in spite of all the modernisation, the company is still run on the same foundation of rock-solid values: giving customers the best quality, variety, price and service, all under one roof. "We run a clean business," Anil said. "We don't cheat." Building relationships with their customers is their priority.

So, even though Mysore Saree Udyog has been featured in internationally-renowned publications (such as *Vanity Fair* and *Lonely Planet*), and even though they are selling their products using the latest technology, the shop is still very much part of the fabric of old Bangalore – and that is the secret of their success.

A WALK ON THE MILD SIDE

AS I MADE MY WAY around Bengaluru, trying to grasp the essence of the city, I felt a sense of fluidity and change, and was able to get glimpses of the old Bangalore, the way things used to be when it was still a small town. But something of the substance of the place was still missing. Arun Pai, owner of Bangalore Walks, understood my dilemma. I called him to find out if I could book a walk (I couldn't, not enough time left in my schedule) and talk to him about getting to know the city.

His company offers a variety of walking tours of Bengaluru, based on both theme and geography, and many people told me this is a must-do activity because, "Bangalore is not a sight-seeing city. It was a small town in the middle of nowhere that was never a capital and didn't even have a river," according to Arun. "There are no large structures, no list of sights to tick off a list.



Fiona Caulfield, author of the *Love Guide to Bengaluru*, says that 'bleasure' travel – a mix of business and leisure – is a critical category in the city's tourism sector

Bangalore does not do a good job of presenting itself."

Arun loves Bengaluru, but he believes it needs an interlocutor. "Bangalore is more of a concept than a tourist city," he said. His company gives people the story behind the attractions, and presents the intangibles. "We are the storytellers of the city," he said. "The tours show people what makes Bangalore special."

And Arun loves to talk about Bengaluru's uniqueness. "Forts, palaces and snake charmers are passé. Bangalore is the new gateway to India; it is what new India is all about. Here, the exotic exists along with the modern, and the old is sitting pretty with the new."

CITY OF THE FUTURE

FIONA CAULFIELD, WHO started her guidebook career by writing and publishing the *Love Guide to Bengaluru* in 2007, couldn't agree more. "Bangalore is the city of the future," Fiona said, in an interview that actually took place in Delhi as we couldn't make our schedules match while I was in Bengaluru. "What I love about Bangalore is the creative ability of the city. It's a very innovative place, an intellectually-rich city. When I bring people to Bangalore, I like to show people India's abundant capability: here is the future of what creativity looks like."

Before starting the *Love Travel Guides* – a series that includes books on Delhi, Mumbai and Jaipur – Fiona had a high-profile global career as a futurist and branding consultant. She was born in Australia and has lived in Canada, the U.K. and the U.S.A. Perhaps it is no coincidence that a futurist now makes her home in Bengaluru.

Fiona writes her books for people who don't have a lot of time, primarily business travellers. She calls it 'bleasure' travel, a mix of business and leisure – and says that bleasure is a critical category in Bengaluru.

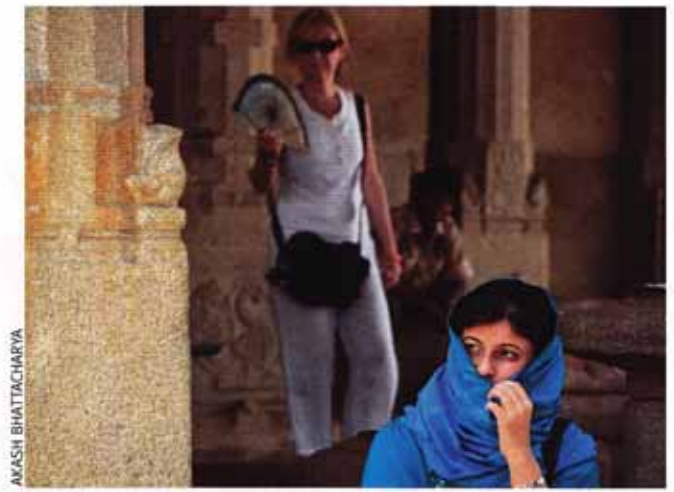
"Bangalore is a tricky place for the traditional tourism experience," she said. "Bangalore actually doesn't have any tourists; Bangalore has business travellers. It's not about money, it's about time. What are the best experiences you can have if you're only in Bangalore for three days?"

Fiona detests the phrase sight-seeing, and recommends that people experience the real life of the city, which, according to her is a celebration of innovation and creativity. "The shopping is brilliant. The city is full of interesting characters, talented designers, contemporary artists. Grasshopper is my favourite place to take people for dinner. It's open-air and sophisticated; relaxing and tranquil. And every detail is thoughtfully designed."

Fiona's books are also thoughtfully written, designed and printed. She hand-picks the recommendations presented in the books and has no desire to be comprehensive. Her goal is to capture the places and experiences that make you love the city she is writing about.

CAPITAL OF LOVE

LOVE DOES SEEM TO be another Bengaluru specialty as two of India's largest and most thriving spiritual centres are nearby: Sathya Sai Baba's *ashrams* in Whitefield and Puttaparthi and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's The Art of Living Foundation International Ashram – which is the headquarters of the world's largest volun-



AKASH BHATTACHARYA

The 100-acre Art of Living ashram, 20 km outside the city, offers visitors short courses, weekend yoga retreats, guided meditation, open-air *satsangs* and Ayurvedic massages

teer-based educational and humanitarian NGO.

Wanting to experience spiritual Bengaluru, I spent a day at the Art of Living *ashram*, situated in the beautiful, pastoral countryside about 20 km outside the city. The 100-acre campus includes a lake, parklands, gardens and the luxurious Sri Sri Ayurveda Panchakarma centre, as well as the famous white five-tiered Vishalakshi Mantap (temple), outdoor amphitheatre, dining halls and residence buildings. The *ashram* encourages visitors by offering short courses, weekend yoga retreats, guided meditation, open-air *satsangs* and Ayurvedic massages. It is also a picturesque spot to spend the day outdoors with the family, especially on Sunday, when they offer a children's camp.

In the late afternoon, after walking all over the ashram grounds and having tea in the reception building, I was ushered into a very comfortable circular room for the highlight of my tour – an interview with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, known as Guruji. I had to wait about 20 minutes while he spoke to several other people, and when it was my turn, he offered me sweets and gave me his full attention.

I felt I was in the presence of a very gentle and thoughtful soul, and I found his soft voice very relaxing. Guruji founded his *ashram* outside of Bengaluru in 1981, almost 30 years ago. Of all the people I met, I felt he would be able to provide me with the most insightful comments about how Bengaluru has changed and whether there is something special about the location that attracts so much spiritual and economic activity.

"Bengaluru is called the IT city. I have a different meaning for IT – inner transformation," Guruji said, with a mischievous smile.

"Bengaluru is a yogic city. It's not too hot or too cold. No extremes. Very congenial for spiritual practice."

He explained that one of the purposes of creating the *ashram* was to provide city dwellers with green space. He said it appeals to, "those who miss the earlier days of Bengaluru, when it was green and there was no traffic jam at all. It was very nice, very pleasant, birds everywhere, trees everywhere."

"On Sundays there are huge crowds here. People come. They need a break from the hustle and bustle of life. The spiritual atmosphere, the spiritual energy recharges them. Spirituality balances stress and brings people back to their nature."

After a week in Bengaluru, change was really on my mind and I asked Guruji his opinion about change: "Change is inevitable. But balance is also inevitable. To bring the balance of nature and development is our responsibility. We have to take more responsibility."

After about 10 minutes, I didn't want to take any more of his time, so I asked him my final question. Change seems to be rampant and out of control in Bengaluru – even Guruji had commented about the lack of city planning during our interview – so, I asked him what changes he would like to see: "I would like to see a lasting smile on everybody's faces and I want people to be environmentally friendly."

He spoke slowly and smiled before giving me his final answer. I felt his peaceful, powerful presence and the fullness of the moment as he said the most salient thing I have ever heard anyone say about any city: "The beauty of a city is indicated by the smiles of the people." ■