



Check out the colour of the Basavangudi flower market

# Bengaluru – a hidden gem

While New Delhi and Mumbai rank high on the list of Indian cities to visit, Bengaluru — with its many parks, architectural landmarks and palaces — shouldn't be far down the list.

by Sreerema Banoo

“It was a town of retired people, many of them British, Indian army officers, fading God-botherers, with all that implied: gardening, bowling, cricket-watching, churchgoing...the Indian equivalent of Cheltenham or Bognor Regis or Palm Beach,” wrote Paul Theroux in *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*, his latest travelogue that retraces the journey through

Europe and Asia that he took more than three decades ago. Back then, he wrote, the “small, sleepy, tree-shaded and bungalodial Bangalore” was so “inconsequential” that he didn't bother making a stop.

While the tree-shaded streets are still visible, as are bungalows in some of the older enclaves, Bangalore (or Bengaluru as it is known today) is far from being small or sleepy. This growing metropolis — dubbed the “Silicon Valley of India” because of its position as the nerve centre of India's software and IT industry — seems to have all the trappings of a bustling city, from traffic jams and flyovers to a brand new international airport.

Beyond the call centres and tech parks, however, pockets of a quieter Bengaluru do exist, as do attractions that will charm any visitor. What's more, the city's location some 950m above sea level means that Bengaluru enjoys favourable weather all year round. Most travellers, however, prefer to visit during the cool winter months from December to February when daytime temperatures are a maximum 26°C while the evenings are a cool 15°C.

## Getting there and around

Thanks to its growth as an IT- and high-tech manufacturing hub, there are several international flights into Bengaluru. From Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia Airlines operates code share flights with Jet Airways four times a week. Return fare for the non-stop flight is about RM1,400, including tax and fees. Jet Airways also plies the KL-Bengaluru route, but with a stopover in Chennai.

Located north of the city, Bengaluru International Airport is about 40km from the Bengaluru central business district. An airport shuttle service provided by the Bangalore Metropolitan Transport Corporation connects the airport

with various parts of the city. The service, which runs at 10-to-15-minute intervals, costs between Rs80 (RM5.90) and Rs200. There are also airport taxi services that charge according to the distance travelled.

One of the best ways to get around Bengaluru is in an auto rickshaw. You can either negotiate the fare or go by the meter. In almost all cases, it is better to use the meter as a negotiated fare means that you are being charged a higher-than-normal rate. A metered fare starts around Rs14 and includes the first kilometre of travel. Make sure that the driver knows where he's going; many will claim to know the destination and then end up getting lost and demanding extra payment.

If you do get an honest and affable driver who's familiar with all of Bengaluru's sights (as was our case with the friendly Uncle Jamsheed), then it's a good idea to hire him for subsequent journeys at a more competitive rate. Having an auto rickshaw at your disposal the entire day is also a great idea if you're making several stops as it saves you from having to flag one down and negotiating the fare each time.

### Accommodation

Visitors are spoilt for choice: Bengaluru has some of the most expensive hotels in India as well as smaller establishments to suit the budget traveller. A

night at any of the five-star hotels like The Oberoi and The Leela Palace will set you back about Rs20,000 while a one-star hotel will cost about Rs1,000.

For those willing to fork out a little more, consider boutique hotels. Usually family-run, these establishments offer a more intimate environment because of their limited number of rooms. Look out for new hotels that may offer "opening" rates that can sometimes be 50% cheaper than the rack rate. You can try centrally located Purple Lotus on Lavelle Road. The mansion was once the home of one of India's freedom fighters.

### Sightseeing

While an auto rickshaw is a great way of getting around, the best way to get a true feel of the city is on foot. If you're in the city on a weekend and have a few hours to spare, join one of the weekend walks organised by Bangalore Walks (Rs500 per person). For a peek into what the city was like before the days of the British Raj, join the Traditional Bangalore Walk. This 2½-hour guided tour around Basavangudi takes you to important-but-now-forgotten landmarks, ancient temples and tree-lined residential enclaves. At each stop, the guide will regale you with tales of the city's origins, the political intrigue in the months leading up to the final resistance against the British in the 18th century, how the seeds of Bengaluru's horticultural

revolution were sown and the many brilliant personalities who lived in the neighbourhood. You'll also be shown some of the best eats in the city, from the best idli and coffee to deliciously spicy thali meals.

One name that you'll often hear in connection with the history of Bengaluru is Tipu Sultan, the de-facto ruler of Mysore who fought against British colonial rule. A must-see in Bengaluru is Tipu Sultan's summer palace, which was built in 1790. Made largely out of wood with embellished balconies, pillars and arches, this two-storey structure is a replica of his Dariya Daulat Bagh (summer palace) in Srirangapatna, near Mysore.

During his reign, Tipu Sultan made many contributions to the city, including completing the Lalbagh Botanical Gardens that was started by his father Haider Ali. Spread over 240 acres, the gardens boast many tropical plants imported from Afghanistan, Mauritius, Turkey and Africa. The best time to visit is in the early mornings and late evenings. If you're a first-time visitor, hire an electric car and the driver-cum-guide will show you around the park. Don't miss the Glass House that's modelled after London's Crystal Palace and do also climb up to the rock hill for a view of Bengaluru. Besides Lalbagh Gardens, the city also boasts numerous parks such as Cubbon Park and JP Park — it's



no wonder that Bengaluru is called India's Garden City.

Other attractions that are worth a visit include the Government Museum on Kasturba Road. Established in 1866, it is one of India's oldest museums and houses a fine collection of jewellery, miniature paintings, sculptures and ancient artefacts. Architecture buffs should not miss taking a drive around the city — the many 19th-century churches and public buildings like Bangalore Palace depict the city's Victorian heritage.

### Sarees, sweets and souvenirs

Bengaluru's retail therapy options are aplenty, from silk sarees and fabrics to designer-wear, jewellery and handicraft. If it's a saree that you're after, the area around MG Road and Commercial Street are chock-full of stores offering a wide range of sarees, salwar kameeze and fabrics. If you're looking for souvenirs, this area also boasts many arts and crafts emporiums selling an array of sandalwood and handcrafted items.

If you'd like to take

a slice of Bengaluru home, then head to Gandhi Bazaar in the Basavangudi area. Subbamma Stores offers roasted split peanuts and fried snacks like murukku and mixture. The store, which is open from 9am to 2pm and 5pm to 10pm daily, is always busy with locals as well as visitors who stock up until their next visit. Locals also reckon that this shop has the best almond toffee sweets in town.

### Good eating

When the locals tell you that Bengaluru is a foodie's paradise, they're not exaggerating. Whether you're after a simple meal of idli and dosa (thosai) or a gut-splitting thali meal, you are spoilt for choice. If you want a simple, no-frills meal, then darshinis are for you. These places — South India's answer to Western fast food — allow you to stand and eat and offer everything from fried rice to

dosa and even some North Indian dishes like naan.

If you prefer a sit-down meal served on banana leaf, head to Kamat Bugle Rock Restaurant on Bull Temple Road in the Basavangudi area. This unassuming eatery offers North Karnataka-style food at reasonable prices.

For a sampling of some North Indian delights, check out Rajdhani at UB City Mall on Vittal Mallya Road. Here, the typical thali comprises two appetisers, four kinds of dhals (lentils) and kadhis (yogurt-based soup), four varieties of vegetables, three types of breads or rotis, two types of rice, three desserts and a salad. The meal also comes with about nine accompaniments that include pickles, chutneys and paapad. And did we mention that the servings are unlimited? A meal for two costs Rs600, which includes a bottle of mineral water.

Fabulous dining options, cool weather and many hidden pockets to be explored — these are just some of the reasons why Bengaluru should be added to the visitor's list. ■

The impressive Parliament House is a must-see