

INDIA OVERLAND TRUCKING

No mint on my pillow

In an open-sided truck from Bombay to Madras, Kate Bevan finds you don't need creature comforts to have a trip you won't forget

There is a certain macho element about Encounter Overland trips, as I discovered in southern India. An open-sided truck, equipped with inward-facing seats, covered with a tarpaulin and bristling with tents and cooking gear, is the antithesis of five-star.

First, it's all about travelling as light as possible: turning up with a wheely bag stuffed with all sorts of essentials – from a solar charger to a fluffy cushion to rest my head on – immediately marked me out as a bit of a wuss. Everyone else was carrying rucksacks that barely looked big enough to contain a clean pair of knickers, never mind any home comforts.

Second, it's about camping, which is all part of the adventure. Although in India you can have a clean, comfortable room with cold running water, a ceiling fan and your own sit-down loo for about a fiver, many of the nights on the road are under canvas.

Third, it's about getting to grips with local life. When camping, teams of two are in charge of the cooking. My cooking duty came on a wet night up in the Western Ghats near the Periyar wildlife sanctuary. Doing the shopping earlier that day in a town en route to Periyar was an eye-opening experience.

We had some idea of the going rate for onions, tomatoes, carrots etc, and ended up going off to a different part of the market after one lot of traders wouldn't budge from inflating their prices by several hundred per cent. As a westerner, you don't mind being fleeced a couple of hundred per cent, but anything more than that is taking too much advantage.

While Erika bought the veggies, I went to the chicken-seller. From inside came a cacophony of squawking, screeching and rustling as the birds thrashed about inside their cages. Next to the hutches were piles of eggs, freshly laid, some with organic dirt and straw still sticking to them. Having established via sign language, limited English (his) and non-existent Tamil (mine) and the interpretation of a passer-by, how many people we were



Row on the wild side: the backwaters of Kerala

Kate Bevan

cooking for, he got on with turning the squawking birds into the raw material for dinner.

It's a noisy business. First, the bird is taken out of the hutch, provoking more squawking among its cagemates. Then there's a thud – and one squawk is stilled. More thuds indicate that the bird is being chopped up into the pieces I might recognise in the supermarket.

Cooking for nine people is a dirty job, which brings me to the next macho part about such a trip. It's about being filthy,

which is oddly liberating. In normal life, we spend a lot of time bathing, scrubbing, de-fuzzing and anointing ourselves with perfumed oil and overpriced emollients, and it's surprising how much time you save in the morning if you eliminate all but the most basic hosing-down.

Travelling on an open-sided truck and bush-camping – ie camping in a random field – is a mucky business. I quickly gave up trying to remove the ring of black around my fingernails as it seemed to be as permanent a fixture as the hot

sun above our heads. I came to appreciate with a new intensity the occasional luxury of a hot shower. I even learned to love a tepid "bucket and chuck-it" wash, where you throw water over yourself with a jug from a bucket of water, particularly after a sweaty day sightseeing or travelling on the truck.

But above all, it's about fun. I've done a lot of travel journalism in the past 10 years or so, flying on Concorde, staying on luxurious private islands, sleeping in suites bigger than the average penthouse

apartment, but nothing has touched my three-and-a-half weeks on a truck with eight other people travelling from Bombay to Madras via the southernmost tip of India.

We went from one steamy, mad city, throbbing and pulsating with people, to another, via riotously coloured temples, fine sandy beaches and tiny villages where children ran out of schools to wave at our truck as we rumbled through. We went from the sticky, green coast of Kerala with its brackish network of canals to the tea plantations at Ooty, 8,400 ft above sea-level and so cold at night that we needed hot-water bottles.

I turned 39 in Ooty, on a bright, cool December day, surrounded not by my family and friends but by my fellow-truckers. I wasn't quite the oldest: Tony, from Essex, is six months older than me, and Susie, an old friend, is just a month younger than me. Francesca had just turned 30. The rest of the group were in

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their 30s, including Rick, the laid-back yet quietly authoritative driver and trip leader. Most of us had very different backgrounds: Erika, a 24-year-old Canadian, was on her Big Trip, and watching every rupee. Kathryn, a dry, competent and warm 28-year-old occupational therapist from Wiltshire, was making up for lost time having discovered the delights of cheap and cheerful extended overland travel relatively late in life. Mark, a sorted young man of 25 and his girlfriend, Emma, 23, were the only couple and two of the most relaxed and easy-going people I've ever travelled with.

My birthday present was a can of Diet Coke, which the others had gone to considerable lengths to find. I savoured every drop. On my birthday, I had an e-mail from a friend inquiring as to whether trucking around India was the beginning of my midlife crisis. If being relaxed, unfussed about how I look and smell, and appreciating tiny luxuries such as a hot shower and a can of Diet Coke is a midlife crisis, then bring it on.

FACTFILE

● Encounter Overland's Goa & South India trip starts at £525 per person for a 23-day expedition plus a "kitty contribution" of \$335, which pays for food and other group expenses. Tel: 01728 862222; www.encounter.co.uk