



Celebrating Holi festival



Meet the Specialist

Sara Wells

In my family's footsteps

Sara Wells explains her special connection with India.

My family's history is so interwoven with the Subcontinent that it seemed almost familiar before I arrived. My grandparents honeymooned in the Himalayan foothills, they were stationed in Calcutta during the days of the British Raj, and my mother was born there! She even remembers as a small child going on family holidays up to the cooler cedar forests of Shimla to escape the heat and dust of the summers in the lowlands. Having grown up with these tales, I eventually embarked on my own trip that went from the princely northern state of Rajasthan to the southernmost tip of KanyaKumari.

I was so surprised by the country's diversity; there really is something for everyone. Cities such as Chennai, Calcutta and Delhi have an abundance of monuments, memorials, museums, forts and colonial architecture to marvel at, and the spirituality of the country is also overwhelming - to witness one of the *aarti* (offering ceremonies) performed on the ghats of the River Ganga is an assault on the senses, with plumes of incense and a cacophony of cymbals accompanied by a flotilla of candles. If you travel during one of the festivals you will be in for a spectacle - my favourite is Holi, the festival of

colours, where the streets come alive with playful skirmishes of coloured powder!

I was introduced to local cultures on walks through the eucalyptus woodlands of Ooty hill station and past Toda tribal villages, or on treks through the tea plantations of Munnar where I helped tea pickers pluck tea leaves and buds. My favourite place in Kerala is the fabulous tropical backwaters, which I have explored by kayak and on lazy days cruised along on a rice barge and watched the river scene unfold: fishermen diving for molluscs, children playing and country canoes piled high with wares being paddled to market.

Next year I am looking forward to trekking the passage between the western Himalaya and the Tibetan plateau in the northwest area of Ladakh, otherwise known as 'Little Tibet' for its rich Buddhist culture with whitewashed gompas (monasteries) festooned with colourful prayer flags and wheels. I'll be reaching Ladakh overland from Delhi via Shimla and the Himalayan foothills, finally retracing my grandparents' and mother's footsteps!