

NONCHALANT NELLORE

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A fascinating and magical journey to Nellore in the peak Indian summer

The essence of travel is captured in this article - how even an absolutely normal town, boiling at 48 degrees Celsius, can be viewed and enjoyed with a profound sense of joy and harmony is portrayed in this article.

The Trip:

A reunion with a childhood friend Sathish made the journey to the city of Nellore possible for me. We met and decided to go to his native place -Nellore. For many of my friends, Nellore did not exactly sound as the best possible holiday destination of a perfect Indian summer. The word just fits it, perfect Indian summer, the mercury soaring very close to 50 degrees, and the heat taking away the lives of many people in Andhra Pradesh. It did sound very scary for me, but I mustered my courage to go to the beautiful city of Nellore.

For those who are unaware, Nellore is nestled amidst shrimp farmeries, with the beautiful Bay of Bengal to the east and the rather dry plains to the west, with greenery in the other directions. It ranks quite highly amongst the rice producing belts of south India and in fact, has provided a certain popular variety of rice with its namesake.

The town is supposed to have been named after the words "nel" and "ooru", which in the local dialect meant "rice grains" and "town" respectively.

Thus acquainted, Sathish and myself caught the morning train to Nellore from Madras, which supposedly starts at 7:15 in the morning, but as per Indian Standard Time, started only at about 7:45 am. The train reached Nellore at around noon and the difference was visible and the newspapers in the railway station did give me Goosebumps as it read -"400 dead in heat wave". But I felt quite at home because of my conversational efficiency in Telugu and the people of Nellore made me feel like a local boy without as much a glimpse at me.

Paramashivam gave quite an amazing welcome, not with flowers or crackers but with his mile wide smile that was extremely pleasing. Paramashivam and his brother Sathish are both smart guys who captivate people by their habits as well as their intelligence. They can make a mountain seem like a molehill with their perspective. Shiva (Paramashivam) was also like a brother to me and treated me as

such. We immediately left to have lunch from the station to a local hotel, which had the nametag of being the best in the town. But to be honest, the food was excellent and so were the spicy pickles.

The atmosphere was very exuberant; people in the town were very lively, helping out each other, proceeding on with their normal routine without bothering about the 47F-degree temperature reading in the thermometer. The town was very colorful, and has an interesting mix of tradition, commerce, local customs, and modernity that is catching up fast.

We then went to the 5th floor apartment of Paramashivam place about 4 kms. from the railway station. This locality was named after a famous personality in the Indian distillery scene- Magunta Subbu Rami Reddy who was often called as the liquor king of India but was killed a few years ago. The apartment was wonderfully ventilated but the windows could not be opened because it was too hot outside. We decided to stay indoors and rest.

Journey in a new land is fascinating and anybody who would manage to go to a new place and sleep could very well be branded as the biggest sloth from a traveler's point of view. To be honest, Nellore wasn't exactly the perfect traveler's paradise but did have a lot to offer. Temples, sylvan surroundings, spicy food, wonderful people, the beaches and the greenery all around made it appealing to me.

We spent that evening was spent in offering puja to a nearby Venkateswaraswami temple, and that by far was the quietest of all venkateshwara swami temples I've been to. Peace and Divinity could be felt all around the temple. Then off to the delicacies, Nellore had to offer. The item we had on our menu was "Chinese parota", obviously not from China, but had a spicy mix in it which might quite rate amongst one of the best dinners I've ever had.

Hot Hotter, Hottest :

The next day Shiva had to leave for Guntur, about 200 kms from Nellore and it was quite a blessing in disguise as he gifted us his scooter, which was to be our Mercedes and limousine for the next few days till he came back. The problem with venturing out in such a hot climate at 48 degrees Celsius, was that either you have a sunstroke or you are dead, or you land up in serious fatigue conditions or you come back home like a barbecued chicken.

But nature had to offer two of its wonder remedies to counter the heat. One was buttermilk and the other was a chemical called H₂O, which was to be consumed not in glasses but in gallons, and the chemical is often called the elixir of life - plain water.

We then left to watch a movie in a nearby theatre. The movie "Kushi" was a blockbuster in the Telugu film industry and the hero Pawan Kalyan, Andhra's very own heartthrob shot to super duper fame from this movie's success. I loved the movie. The evening once again was dedicated to one more delicacy called "Ceylon parota" and the same Andhra spice was there to be gifted to my taste buds.

Of Gods and Temples:

Sathish was a religious person and so we planned to spend the next day going to all the temples in Nellore. There are about half-a-dozen historic temples in Nellore town itself and we wanted to be a part of the history at least for some time. We had the luck of being in a period of time when the temples are not too crowded or deserted. Late in the morning we left to Raja Rajeshwari temple and then to Ayyappa swami temple, which was located on either side of the grand northern trunk road connecting Calcutta and Madras.

In fact the entire economy of the town is centered around this trunk road which bustles with agricultural trade all round the year. In the evening we left for a very famous place called Ranganayakulapeta, which had a temple more than 1000 years old.

The temple's main deity is Ranganathaswamy and had a huge, impressive gopuram. The beautiful maiden called Penneru in the form of a river makes a beautiful arch here and in about 24 kms from there is the sea. The temple had a room full of mirrors called "Addhala Mantapamu" in Telugu and had a 1000 year old painting of Lord Krishna which had this magical effect far beyond any portrait of Monalisa or Picasso's modern artwork.

The eyes of this painting always looked at you irrespective of where you are placed. There was a peculiar charm in this temple which was beyond words to explain and the temple people told the legend that if the waters of Penneru ever touched the lord's idol that would signal the end of Nellore. I felt proud reading the story of the temple which was written in the temple's walls in Telugu. The day ended on a wonderful note and was amazing considering the spiritual satisfaction we got from the divinity of Nellore's temples.

Nature's Palette:

The next day was very different. We ventured to have a look at nature at it's colorful best. We were off to the coast to get some fresh air. The destination was a place called Krishnapatnam about 25 kms from Nellore due east and was a fishing village with a beautiful coast. The coastline is always beautiful.

To many, even to Sathish it sounded like a place with sand and water but to me, as it had always been, it was a place where the golden sun, the silver sand and the blue water greeted everybody who passed by with it's Dance of Grace and Vibrance which is seen as waves, the dance keeps repeating itself whether we like it or not. To me the seas and the oceans have always been an element of passion and admiration.

We left to Krishnapatnam in the evening at about 4 and was perhaps one of the most beautiful rides I've ever experienced. I could very well compare it's beauty to the vast emptiness of Pamban Island or to the winding highways of grandfather mountain in north Carolina or to the splendor of thanjavur district

where I've experienced mother nature in all her glory.

I was simply seeing Mother Nature make a painting and change it every second with her beautiful palette of amazing colors. The golden sun changed very slowly from light yellow to bright orange and the only two colors other than these were the greenery of the fields and that of the beautiful blue sky enveloping us with it's aura.

The coastal belt of Nellore was dotted with numerous shrimp farmeries, which was a booming industry there. The scooter ride was excellent considering the fact that it was a newly laid state highway. We made occasional stops in the 30-minute ride to have refreshments. The people were so friendly considering the fact that we were dressed in alien outfits of Wrinkle-free Cotton Pants and Casual Shirts, and if they could be so friendly to people like us then we couldn't imagine the warmth they extended to their own people.

I feel god's gift to the people of Nellore is their bright, true smile, which makes them so hospitable. We then reached Krishnapatnam and saw a lighthouse, which seemed rather deserted. The dance of the waves and the delta of a local river welcomed us with its dancing waves. We spent about half-an-hour in the beach and shot a dozen photographs. There weren't any people in the beach other than the local fishermen.

We then returned back home in the same highway and had a taste of another color of mother nature's palette, the bright orange slowly turning to black. But yet we enjoyed the ride, nature's paintings and the beautiful coast and above all a place we could never forget- Krishnapatnam.

I'll be back Nellore!!

The next day was quite a sad day, as we had to bid farewell to Nonchalant Nellore. It was the same hot day and the same old train but now there seemed to be a difference visible around me that could only be experienced, never told. The difference was the change in my attitude towards this hot vacation, and something seemed to have an influence on my attitude and that was the town by itself.

By now Nellore had cast a spell on me. I felt as if I was leaving home.

The real spirit of travel was what I learned from this unforgettable trip. Travel is not just about your destination and the places we see there but it is all about the wonderful people you meet on the way, and the way you perceive things around you. Nellore might not be a traveler's paradise, but as far as I was concerned Sathish, Paramashivam, Warm neighbors, smiling faces all around the town, mother nature's glory here made it just an amazing place to be. Especially in the Indian summer (hahaha!!).

So you should have guessed by now to where I am packing my travel bags next summer when the temperatures soar up? Yes, you have guessed it !!

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