



On a Shoestring to Coorg: An Experience of Southern India

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From Bombay to the hippy beaches of Goa and on to the tropical tip of India, travelling by boat and bus, staying in fishermans huts and no-star hotels, Dervla Murphy and her young daughter, Rachel, explored southern India. En route, they fell in love with the tiny mountain paradise of Coorg, whose landscapes and people form the focus of an entertaining diary.

On a Shoestring to Coorg: An Experience of Southern India Details

Date : Published March 6th 1995 by Flamingo (first published 1976)

ISBN : 9780006547990

Author : Dervla Murphy

Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Travel, Cultural, India, Nonfiction, Asia, Science, Geography

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Ape says

This is my first proper Dervla travel book. Before now I'd only read her autobiography on her early years growing up in Ireland. I love travel accounts by people who like to do slow-time travel and really explore the area. People who travel by foot or by bike are great. In this particular journey, November to March in the 1970s, she's not on the bike because of her little travelling companion: her five year old daughter, Rachel. This may have alarm bells ringing for many with the cutesy alert, but it's really not a problem here at all. Dervla comes across as a great down to earth mother, and they do the same exploring as she would have done on her own - even hiking through a national park together for several days.

The initial plan for this trip was travelling around Southern India for a few months, which they do. But I don't think she'd reckoned with falling in love with this little known, hilly area, Coorg, where they end up staying for a couple of months and experiencing all aspects of Indian life, including marriage, funerals, name ceremonies etc... It's an insight into life in India, and the caste system / albeit as it was in the 70s and this wonderful idyl of just getting away from it all. It's not the kind of thing most of us could ever afford to do - certainly not me - so well written books like these give me an outlet for these day dreams.

I do wonder what Murphy would make of India now - not that I've ever been - but I don't suppose Goa is still the relatively untouched hippy paradise it was back then. And I wonder what Coorg is like now. Bizarre to think that the children there in the book will now be middle aged.

Here's one of my favourite bits (a moment when I wish I was there):

"Suddenly I stopped and pointed into one of the wild mango-trees that grow by the roadside. Rachel looked and went scarlet with excitement.

"Monkeys!" she whispered ecstatically. "Millions and millions of monkeys!"

"About a dozen," I corrected prosaically. (p. 36)

It's just been such a great trip through India whilst I'm stuck in dreary January.

Bookworm with Kids . says

This was an interesting read. Dervla Murphy travelled a bit around South India with her 5 year old daughter in the early 1970s. She remarks on many occasions about how she hates travelling by bus and is only doing so because of Rachel, her daughter. This does get a little annoying after a while. She obviously likes southern India far more than the north which she complained bitterly about in an earlier book. While I realise that the early 1970s were a much different time to present, I couldn't quite get over the number of times she left her 5 year old either in the care of someone she had just met or seemingly on her own - once saying that she left Rachel playing in the jungle beside their hotel while she walked into a village some distance away to get shoes! On the whole, this is a well written book and quite different from other travel books, as Murphy is very different to other travellers.

Vanessa says

I loved Dervla Murphy's *The Ukimwi Road*, so I was excited to see this on a book-swap shelf at a hostel. At the same time, I was reluctant to pick it up, fearing that 30 year old descriptions of India, a place I'd never been, would mean little to me, as would this book's focus on travelling with a small child. That first fear was accurate - though I found Murphy's descriptions of India's history and the caste system interesting, the rest of her experiences just didn't grip me. As for the latter fear, I ended up wishing she had devoted **more** of the book to her daughter, and made "my first trip with my 5-year-old daughter" the overarching theme for her story. Instead, her daughter is given equal (or lesser) billing with descriptions of scenery and villagers, and the book's theme ends up something along the lines of "look how peaceful Coorg is and how nice the people here are", which is as cliched a travel-writing trope as you can get.

Rajani says

I was looking at a more gripping travelogue cos the author was making her way through Coorg with her 5 year old daughter. I was however quite disappointed with the writing style... though I admire the fact that she bicycled through parts of India when getting around and getting through was really difficult.

Judith Rich says

I quite enjoyed this travelogue of a mum taking her 5 year old daughter to what sounds like a delightful part of India in 1974. The writing doesn't feel dated and it's easy to forget that the little girl would now be 48, until there is a specific time marker (a party for the Dalai Lama's 38th birthday, for example)

I do wonder what today's mothers of young children make of this, though. I can't imagine some of my friends telling their 5 year old daughters they can go for a walk by themselves, or just to put up with people pinching your fair skin because they think you're pretty and you shouldn't hurt their feelings! The child is also allowed to go off and play for hours with new found friends or is left with babysitters the author hasn't known for long. Can't see that happening now.

Martin Allen says

Very interesting diariased account of travels by mother and five year old daughter through India in the early 1970s - mainly Coorg area. A little too pacey in places and flits over quite a lot quite quickly when you would like to have heard a bit more. But those passages that are given time are beautifully descriptive and overall a really good read.

Anna says

Read this in India, which made me totally identify with the author's tales of traveling through the southern

part of the country...

Michelle says

Well I didn't finish this so it's a bit naughty to review it. But it was my book group book, and I probably would have finished but I had to go away and I just didn't want to take it. So it wasn't great and unputdownable, but it was okay.

Murphy biked, bussed and walked around remote places for decades. In the 70s, when she visited Coorg, it probably was remote and hard to get to. Now she could update everyone on her experiences on her facebook page, and most of the Indians she met could read her blog as well. The world is no longer so intrepid.

Book group discussion was mostly about her daughter accompanying her - her 5 year old daughter. They got sick, they stayed in grotty accomodation, she let her daughter wander off with all sorts of Indian families and just trusted that her daughter would be safe. We had the same discussion over the Glass Castle - should parents do this to their children? Or was this accepatable once?

I liked the information about the caste system and the differences between Indian provinces, but it wasn't gripping. So I wouldn't really recommend it to anyone, but I didn't feel cheated of the 3 hours of my life that I'll never get back by reading it :)

TRJ says

Its a travel memoir set in the 1970's where the author takes her 5 year old daughter to a trip to India. She stays in cheap hotels or with friends, travels using the local buses and trains. The author has been to the main city, Bombay (now Mumbai) before and does not seem to like it from her descriptions. She travels down south to Karnataka, Kerala etc. Of all the places, she loves the Coorg the most and a huge chunk of the book is devoted to her love of Coorg, its history, the people, the culture. As an Indian , I could relate to a lot of things, like the passion for reading among the Keralites as well the practice of caste system, which sadly is still in force till date.

The book drags at places. People who are Indians or have been to India might like this book. Many things and even names of places are outdated so not for people who is planning their trips. Just read if you want to see a glimpse of old India or love reading travel memoirs.

Jane Routley says

One of the first and most charming books I've ever read on India

Tara says

Really nice diary style travelogue. There are a few digressions (and opinions) that make this a book of its time, but Murphy's observations are familiar forty years on. It's a gentle read that is particularly enjoyable if

you have familiarity with Karnataka.

Daren says

This is a diary style book, with diversions into the local history, the local culture and some of the many people that the author and her five year old daughter come into contact with on their four month travels in Coorg, in 1973/74.

Never a fan of big cities, Murphy heads out of Bombay relatively quickly, and spends only a few days in Goa before finding a place they like, and base themselves in Coorg (now renamed Kodagu), a district in Karnataka. From there they take shorter excursions, returning to stay a couple of months and for a short while become a part of the village community.

I really enjoy Murphy's writing. For me, she gets the balance right. She writes about the things I find interesting, and she gets the mix right - explains in detail some things and skims over others, and for me at least it all works. I also find her pretty amusing, which I know not all people do.

Like others I felt some apprehension about the fact her five year old daughter Rachel joined her in her travels (this is the first book which Rachel features, although I have read a later book - *Where the Indus Is Young: Walking to Baltistan* which also features Rachel). Initially, for the author, Rachel accompanying her means she is not on her bicycle, and cannot undertake the hiking or climbing to the same extent, and so is on trains and buses more than your usual Dervla Murphy book, but really for a five year old, Rachel is pretty easy work. She is ridiculously independent and seems to have common sense beyond her years - well she is portrayed that way in the book... Really her presence adds to the book, and doesn't diminish the story at all.

I found it pretty amusing the way the author was quite happy for Rachel to make her own experiences, despite the risks. It is fair to say this lack of parental guidance in 1974, was still pretty unusual, but I can't see the same level of trust (trust in good luck maybe?) now.

Having literally just arrived at their first hotel in Bombay:

... I saw her disappearing up the street with two new-found Indian friends. It seems she has gone to lunch with someone; I felt too exhausted to find out exactly with whom, or where. P5.

And another example (of several) at a wildlife sanctuary in Thekkady

After lunch I left Rachel playing in the jungle near the hotel - where there were two tame elephants and lots of non-shy langurs to entertain her - while I walked halfway back to Kumili in search... P157.

And another quote I stumbled on while looking for child abandonment examples:

At a little distance from the Co-operative building, on the edge of the forest, stands our 'local', a ramshackle cottage from which Subaya every morning procures my breakfast litre of palm-tody for 50 paise. (Where else nowadays could one buy a litre of beer for 2 1/2 pence?) ... If one neglects to drink it within a few hours it is said to do terrible things to the innards, so at last I have an excuse for drinking beer with my breakfast. The Coorgs think it so health-giving that even elderly female pillars of respectability habitually have a glass (but not, admittedly, a litre) before breakfast. P187, (her brackets).

Excellent stuff.

da-wildchildz says

And with that comment I was content.

Last line from On a Shoestring to Coorg. I hoped this would be an exciting travelogue to read after the disappointment of some others I'd recently read. Sadly, this book was focussed on banal factual details rather than the experience of travelling in India, which made it a drag. The only aspect that cheered up the book was the amusing comments of Dervla's 5 year old daughter, Rachel.

Julia Rice says

A slow read, but a delightful antidote to the "Do everything in 48 hours" type of travel book littering the shelves of bookshops. With this book you get the flavours and the smells, and you also get the child's-eye view as this is an account Murphy's first extended trip with her then 5-year old daughter. You have to remember it's written in 1976 so its account of India is outdated, but it's all the more fascinating for that. A joy of a read.

Mary Soderstrom says

Dervla Murphy is one of my heroes. An Irish woman, she has travelled the world on a shoestring, getting around by foot, donkey and bicycle. I first came across her work when I was looking information about Africa and took *The Ukimwi Road: From Kenya to Zimbabwe* out of the library. Fascinating reading, with much to say about Central Africa, including how AIDS was transmitted along a major international highway, and, well before the horrible genocide in Rwanda, the way that Tutsis, pushed out of Rwanda in an earlier conflict, were waiting in Uganda to return.

This time I was looking for portraits of South India for my next book project. (Called *Unidentical Twins*, it will compare various political entities that are the same yet very different, including the Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.) During the trip that Murphy recounts in this book, she takes her five year old daughter on the pair's first major expedition, and the account is fascinating. They travel very light: two backpacks, one small enough for little Rachel to carry, and that's it. The time is December and January 1973-74, and while they have contacts to visit, the pair are very much on their own.

Rachel is a trooper, as is her Mum. They have mishaps--including a bout of brucellosis, not a disease you mess with--but they see people, places and things that few Western travellers did at that point. Travelling with a child opens new possibilities too.

Well into her 80s, Murphy continues to travel. Rachel's early experiences apparently had no bad effects: one of Murphy's most recent books tells of her travels with Rachel and Rachel's three daughters in Cuba, *The Island That Dared: Journeys in Cuba*. That one sounds like it should be good to read in this post-Fidel Castro days.
