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A Bengaluru Primer

Prepared for the Omidyar Group by Renée Soucy

## **BACKGROUND & HISTORY**

With history stretching back to the 1200's, Bengaluru is like so many Indian cities, very old and very young, struggling to catch up with 20+ years of rapid, unregulated growth. Home to 10+ million and capital of Karnataka, it sits in the heart of South India, equidistant to the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal. A cool elevated climate (3,000ft) gave it the erstwhile title Garden City. In the congested city center, large flowering trees line streets and a generous canopy interrupts the skyline thanks to a handful of large parks and military bases.

## **DEMOGRAPHICS**

Once the domain of retirees, a constant inward flow of multi-lingual young professionals now shapes the city as evidenced by the countless pubs, malls, and coffee shops catering to their globalized tastes. A vibrant, tech-driven business culture with hundreds of international corporations supports local industry.

In contrast, migrant laborers form the core of the hospitality, construction, and service industries. Construction sites are ubiquitous, often with women carrying bricks or sand in vessels upon their heads. Young families often live in improvised shelters on the sites.

The city is religiously diverse and respect for others' beliefs is enshrined in law. Many locals speak English and are used to interacting with international visitors. Most signage is in Kannada and English, the bridge language for linguistically diverse South Indians.

## **WHAT TO PACK**

Prepare for sunny days, cool nights, and chilly air-conditioned offices. Pack pieces in lighter, breathable fabrics with a few layering options. (cardigan/hoodie, scarf, etc.). Business casual is the norm for most organizations. Local men and women don South Indian styles like cotton "mundus" (men's sarong) and silk saris along with Western styles and manners, which often signal education and status.

Keep a small pouch with travel sized Kleenex, hand sanitizer, insect repellent, SPF, and lubricating eye drops on hand. Indian pharmacies are well-stocked and safe to use in case you forget any medications.

## **MODESTY**

Bengaluru is hyper-westernized, yet traditional concepts of modesty endure. Adapt skimpy/clingy clothing: pair ladies' tank tops or camisoles with light scarves to drape over décolleté and shoulders. Wear jeans and leggings with mid-thigh length tunics. Men should avoid going shirtless unless they are swimming and wear a t-shirt to work out or jog. When visiting a temple or shrine, don full length pants.

## **FOOTWEAR**

Sandals (flats or heeled) are the most popular footwear for local women. Slip on loafers, sneakers and sandals are popular choices for men. Flipflops are regarded as shower shoes or slippers for indoors and are never appropriate for business, though sandals for women are. Rougher terrain can be found anywhere so pack a pair of rugged comfortable shoes (tevas/keens etc) for longer walks.

## **EATING & DRINKING**

Excellent global food and beverages can be enjoyed in Bengaluru with high standards of cleanliness and hygiene observed in the better restaurants and cafes. Pubs are plentiful and popular. Avoid street food and opt for safer versions at good hotels or restaurants. Indian food here is *significantly* spicier than what is served in the US, so order a side of yogurt ('curd') just in case and be careful not to mistake a green chili for a green bean!

## **HANDS ON**

Indian food in India is traditionally enjoyed without cutlery: a mindful, connected approach to food which introduces the proportions, temperature and textures of foods before they are consumed. Hand washing

sinks are common and post-meal finger bowls are standard in higher-end establishments. Visitors are offered cutlery wherever they dine.

#### LOCAL CUSINE

South India's iconic dishes are dosas, idly, and vadas. A dosa is a rolled crepe, often filled with spiced potatoes and vegetables (masala dosa). Idly are fluffy discs of steamed fermented ground rice. Vadas are fried savory donuts made from ground rice and lentils. All three are served with the coconut chutney (puréed coconut and spices) and sambar (a spicy tomato/vegetable broth), often on a banana leaf. Though India is famous for tea, the South is a major coffee exporter and the breakfast drink of choice is a milky Madras coffee, served in a metal tumbler and saucer. Order with no sugar or on the side.

#### KNOW YOUR H2O

Always drink bottled water and brush teeth with it, too. Be vigilant. If a situation arises where sharing a bottle of water without individual vessels to drink from occurs, Indians never let the bottle touch their mouths and instead pour the water into their mouths from a few inches away.

#### A BENGALURU STATE OF MIND

Eastern and Western concepts of time are a worthy starting point in embracing an Indian state of mind. The West sees time as linear, a timeline. The East, cycles. This more cyclical, freeform approach appears in traffic patterns and settings where forming a line is required. Cutting in line is a minor social offense while assertiveness in keeping your place in line is expected.

#### ARRIVING

After disembarking you'll go through customs and be subject to an x-ray of your carry-on bags before proceeding to baggage claim. What can feel like a frustrating delay is actually your first taste of the local security protocols. Bags are x-rayed/inspected at the entrances of almost every public space.

#### CHALLENGES

Prepare to be challenged by what you might encounter outside of the hotel. At some point you'll likely witness human struggles and/or environmental degradation which could be upsetting. While walking through a shopping district or waiting in traffic its common to be approached by beggars. Its heart wrenching to see a malnourished child or an emaciated elderly person begging. Locals advise against giving money, as there is no way of knowing if those begging are enslaved by organized criminal gangs. Give food or donate to recognized charities and remember that internal guilt fuels an already emotionally upsetting situation while external expressions of pity reduce the dignity of the beggars themselves.

#### SOCIAL SAVOIR FAIRE

In a country with 13+ recognized languages, nonverbal communication is embraced. Palms pressed together in 'Namaste' is a graceful gesture of greeting and gratitude. Pointing with eyes rather than fingers expresses subtlety. In contrast, exposing the soles of the feet (shoes or barefoot) towards others (for example someone speaking in front of a group), is considered disrespectful. Removing shoes when entering a home is customary. Even if hosts say it's OK to not to, always prepare to remove footwear when approaching the threshold.

Kannada phrases like "toom-bah (many) thanks" will generate a smile from the man/woman on the street. Sir/Madam are honorifics that, especially when used towards people in service roles will go a long way. In most offices, junior staff refer to their managers this way rather than by their first names.

#### OFF TOPICS

Indians are very patriotic and many are sensitive to criticism or questioning about political, economic, or social challenges facing the country. Avoid potentially uncomfortable subjects like Kashmir, sexual assault, and caste-based discrimination/violence.