

Hello, Mango Papaya?



Fruit seller, Kovalam Beach

Imagine a Big Issue seller asking you if you would like to buy a magazine and then, when you answer that you already have one or that you couldn't buy one today, chasing you down the street insisting that it was a very cheap price, expecting you to barter, telling you that you were their best friend, making you promise to buy from them tomorrow and then selling you a bottle of coconut oil instead. It doesn't happen does it? Instead our Big Issue sellers stand cheerfully and courteously acknowledging people's "no's" with a smile.

I was in Kerala, in Southern India recently, and spent some time with the ladies who sell fruit on the beaches for a living. Although just as cheerful as our Big Issue sellers, their selling techniques were, quite literary, a continent apart.

While I sat overlooking the beach reading the Big Issue that I had taken with me, eating my sixth mango of the day and watching my seventh no doubt approaching, I fondly reminisced the gentle ways of our Big Issue sellers. By the time I had started eating the seventh mango I had just bought from the insistent lady, I had decided to find out more about the fruit selling ladies who were, like our Big Issue sellers, just trying to make an honest living. Luckily I'm very partial to a bit of fruity refreshment.

The fruit sellers rely on the tourist trade in Southern India, so much so, that when the tourists leave it is not worth going to sell the fruit on the beaches anymore. The main tourist season is only 5 months long, cut short by the intense heat of the

summer and the onset of the monsoon season. Therefore, competition is fierce on the hot sands of Kovalam beach, and with coconuts drawn at 20 feet, there is the possibility you might get caught in the 'crossfire'. Despite all this, the selling is good-natured and the atmosphere relaxed.

When I first met Leela she won me over with her persistent but warm beckoning to her stall. She was not only happy to provide me with a sumptuous meal of fruit at a good price but to chat away and tell me more about her life as a fruit seller. Her English, learnt mostly from her contact with tourists, was far from perfect but far better than my non-existent Malayalam (I'm ashamed to say).

Like all of the fruit ladies, she has adopted a more western name that is far more pronounceable to the tourists than her real name. Leela, a resident of Kovalam, used to walk the beach selling fruit from the basket precariously balanced on her head but she says she is too old now and has a bad leg so she sets up her stall under the shade of an umbrella near the north end of the beach. Despite the touches of grey in her hair, it is difficult to ascertain her age as her smile has a certain youthfulness.

Even though she does not walk the beach anymore, the work is still hard and her day starts at 5am when she travels the 10km distance to the market in Trivandrum to purchase her wares for the day ahead. A group of ladies normally travel together, mostly by bus but sometimes by rickshaw. She sets up stall on the beach by about 9 or 10am and sits there all day until about 4 or 5pm, hoping

that she leaves with a bit of money in her pocket rather than a lot of fruit to carry home.

Leela does this almost every day throughout the five months of the tourist season and spends the rest of the time working at home for her family. She has six children and her husband is a fisherman so the time she spends earning money from the tourists is very welcome.

January and February, at the height of the season, provide the best earnings. However, Leela explains that lunchtimes, potentially the best time of day for selling, don't necessarily provide as many customers as they could. The big hotels that have sprung up in more recent years have attracted a different breed of tourist. Most prefer to disappear into the more clinical and far from 'native' hotel restaurants at lunchtimes and leave the fruit sellers to fend for themselves.

It's a bit of a vicious circle really. Without the tourists, there wouldn't be the trade that the locals have come so much to rely on but there are limits. As the numbers grow so do the big hotels, effectively robbing the trade of the locals and lining the pockets of the wrong people. Eventually the locals can be left with no option but to get badly paid jobs in these big hotels and this, for me, would be the point at which the local colour and experience would be washed out of a place and replaced with an experience that you could have got much nearer to home.

My money wouldn't have stretched to a fancy hotel and, even if it had, I wouldn't want to give up the experience of staying in a small, family run guest house where the money was going to the people that deserve it. Where else could you sit chatting to the owner for hours, sharing jokes, experiences and questions, sharing books, feel completely safe, comfortable and welcome and even have your washing taken in by the time you reached 'home' in the midst of a mad rainstorm. Not in a fancy hotel.

The same could be said about the fruit sellers. Sitting eating fruit and chatting with them is a wonderful, warm experience and one that leaves you with a feeling of fullness in many ways. It is a very healthy experience too with a bountiful supply of tropical delights such as coconuts, mango, pineapple, melon and papaya skilfully prepared, by means of a



Leela prepares a pineapple

rather large machete type knife, right in front of your eyes. Besides how can you resist?

It seems it was just as difficult for Leela to say no to people too. While I was with her a young girl, in tatty and dirty clothing, came to beg shyly by her stall. She was only about 14 or 15 years old. Although I didn't know what she was saying, Leela spoke softly to the girl while she bundled up an assortment of fruit before handing it gently to her. It was being unwrapped and eaten before she had even stood up and walked away. Competition may be fierce on Kovalam beach but compassion still comes first. When I said goodbye to Leela I felt privileged to have seen this side of the 'dog eat dog' world of the fruit sellers and said thank you for more than the healthy food and company she had provided me with.

As my partner and I left our early morning yoga class the next day, Elizabeth cornered us. Elizabeth sits at the same end of the beach as Leela and had seen how much fruit we had consumed the previous day.

Competition is fierce, especially towards the end of the season, and she wanted our assurance that today we would buy from her. Our loyalty to Leela was being tested but Elizabeth indicated to us that it was only right that we should share our custom so we promised to return later. When we did she seemed genuinely delighted that we kept our promise. It seems that in India 'later' is a very loose word for meaning 'maybe' and one which is used frequently in a questioning way by the many beach sellers that walk up and down with everything from fruit, painted

cards, and beach mats to sarongs, sandals and 'good Kerala grass'.

On our way to see Elizabeth, Mary, another fruit seller, who seemed intent that we should buy from her, stopped us. We tried to explain that we had already promised someone else today but she still followed us part way down the beach and eventually gave up but not before practically ordering us back, with a smile, to see her the next day.

Then a little further along and only just around the corner from Elizabeth's stall, we met Sally. Sally sits with her stall close to Elizabeth, and on seeing us approaching and out of sight of Elizabeth, had tried to intercept us and persuade us to buy from her. We continued, intent on keeping our promise to Elizabeth. Even when we sat down with Elizabeth, the lady on the stall next door said that we should see her tomorrow. Life can become complicated on Kovalam beach if you promise, even

unintentionally, to too many fruit ladies!

Elizabeth, like Leela, said she was too old to walk along the beach selling so she too relies on the passing trade. When I asked her whether business was good at the moment and whether she made a reasonable living from it, she screwed up her nose and didn't seem to want to elaborate. I hadn't expected my question to be intrusive, as often the local people on first meeting with you will quite happily jump in with the question of how much you earn! It is normally about fourth in line to 'Are you married?' 'Any children?' and 'What is your living?' I took Elizabeth's hint and stopped asking such questions.

When we were sat with Elizabeth we noticed that Leela wasn't there and we asked Elizabeth whether she knew where she was. She didn't know and we wondered whether all the fruit we had bought yesterday had led her to take a day off. This would be hard to believe though



Elizabeth's stall

as the ladies would normally take every opportunity to earn as much as they could before the season ends.

We spent the next few days getting our daily fruit from various ladies that we had promised to. Then we left Kovalam for a while and on our return we took to spending more time down the southern end of the beach. That is when we met Lily.

Lily's smile, coupled with the twinkle she seems to have in her eyes, was unbeatable. She is only little and even I, standing a mere 5' 2", dwarfed her. She sets up her stall (a piece of cloth to sit on, her basket of fruit and her knife) under the shade of a palm, but also walks along the south end of the beach to sell. It was while she was walking that we met her.

The quality of the fruit Lily sold us was impeccable and the price was much lower than any of the other sellers. She explained that most sellers would sell the fruit to tourists for a much higher price than locals would expect to pay but she didn't like to do that, as she didn't think it was fair. You can't really blame the fruit sellers for doing this as, after all tourists have more money than the locals. However, Lily gained our upmost respect with her fairness and even when we gave her more than the price she had asked, she still then gave us an extra coconut later in the day 'as a present'.

Lily was happy to chat and told us that her husband worked on the road being built between Kovalam and Trivandrum. She proudly told us that she had two children and that her son-in-law was one of the lifeguards who worked on the beach. Then an even bigger smile crept on her face as she told us with even more

pride, that she was a grandmother too. When we said that she looked far too young to be a grandmother, she giggled and said we were her good friends for saying this. Any granny over here would have killed for her young looks and energy. She may have been small but she could crack a coconut with one swing of her knife.

We visited Lily daily and I always looked forward, particularly, to our fruit breakfast with her in the morning. As a special treat, she even got us a jackfruit from the market one day, although because it was the end of the jackfruit season, they were quite difficult to find. I'd never had a jackfruit before but I will remember the moment more for sitting on the beach, chatting to Lily and Lalitha (the lady who hires boogie boards, umbrellas and chairs on the beach who we also spent time with) as we shared the fruit and dodged the waves sweeping high up the beach every so often. The giggling was infectious.

I felt very sad when we said goodbye. It wasn't just because we were at the end of our stay in India, or that we were returning to colder, wetter climes and our 9 to 5 existence. It was because I would miss Lily with her giggles and smiles, energy and sheer determination to make ends meet. Lily said that we were amongst the last of the tourists left from the season and now we were leaving, it wasn't worth selling fruit any more this year. She'd been selling more than just fruit to me in the short time I had known her – her smile was worth a thousand mangos – and I only hoped that our custom had helped her smile a little more.

I went and bought a copy of the Big Issue at lunchtime today. It had been a foul morning of torrential rain and thunderstorms. I stopped and chatted for a while to the Big Issue seller



about the weather before I walked further into town, where I noticed people going into WH Smiths to browse through and buy magazines in the dry and the warm. It reminded me of the tourists in Kovalam bypassing the fruit sellers to go to eat in the big hotels and fancy restaurants.

India may be the other side of the world but it's the same the world over. Fruit sellers in India and Big Issue sellers on the streets of the UK are both trying to make a little bit of money in a big world. Their methods may be slightly different but they both sell good quality goods for a good price. They both rely on the public to realise this before disappearing into the world of our consumerist society.

So if you are fortunate enough to go to such places as India, before you book yourself into a fancy hotel and go to eat at a fancy restaurant, take a look around at the people you are bypassing. Stay in a small family run guesthouse and go see Lily and the fruit-selling ladies. I guarantee that everybody, including yourself, will benefit more from the experience.

Likewise, before you go into WH Smith to browse the multitude of magazines on the shelves, remember there are people out there on the streets who would be more than pleased to sell you a quality magazine at a very good price. They will even throw in a smile for free, despite the rain.



The Fruit Sellers under the palms

Lily smiles while preparing coconut