

Dear Family and Friends,

India was a country full of color, curry, elephants, and the kindest people. I have never felt more welcomed and full of joy than when I arrived in India. Leaving every country has been very difficult but I cried leaving India because for some reason that I am still having a hard time comprehending I fell in love with the country. I loved the people, the food, and beauty of all the different landscapes I had the opportunity to experience. I plan to come back at some point in my life and hopefully spend a few months traveling around the country that seemed to give me so much in so few days.

We (Sami, Sara, Daniela, Marie, and 3 other friends) spent our time in the South of India in the state of Kerala. Our ship was docked in the city of Kochi. The majority of my classmates travelled far North to Delhi to see the Taj Mahal and the Ganges River. Traveling to these places is equivalent to flying from NYC to LAX and then taking a 4 hour bus ride after the long flight. Although the immense amount of traveling to see one of the 7 Wonders of the World would have been completely worth it, we decided to explore the South and plan another trip to the North later in life when we had more time.

My first experience of India was of walking out of the ship terminal and being pulled in every direction by 50 yelling Indian men who wanted to take us in their auto ricksha around the city. After a whirlwind of negotiating and laughing at the utter chaos of the situation we ended up in 3 different rickshas driven by a group of friends (I think they are all friends) who brought us around the entire town of Kochi for the day. As I reread my journal I described the day as "one of the craziest of my life but also one of the most fun." We had an "unofficial tour guide" for the day who rode with Sami and I in our ricksha. He made us laugh for the majority of the day and would buy us different fruit and desserts at every market and bakery we passed. The day ended with an impromptu game of soccer with local taxi drivers and children outside the ship. We used paper plates as goals and got so dirty it looked like we had gotten sprayed by a cannon of dirt. I thought the following days in India could not get any better but somehow they continued to exceed my expectations.

The next morning we were picked up by our driver, Biju, who may be the kindest man I have ever met. He would stay with us for the next week taking us hundreds of miles through the beautiful mountains of India all the way to the beach. The first thing he did was show us pictures of his family who he had left at 4:30am to come and get us for our adventure. The entire trip he acted like our father and would never let us be alone or feel unsafe. The country of India was amazing, but it was the people like Biju and the host families we stayed with that really made my first experience of India one I will never forget.

The first day we drove a few hours to the mountain village of Munnar. Words and pictures can do the landscape no justice. We drove past thousands of tea plantations that blanketed the hillsides. The vibrant green mazes of bushes could be seen for miles. We stopped at a tea factory to learn about the process of making tea (Did you know black, green, and Indian Chai all come from the same plant just different production processes)? We also had the opportunity to visit a spice plantation to learn about the different medicinal properties of spices such as cloves, cardamom, and cinnamon.

The next day we traveled to the village of Kalari which is surrounded by the Thekkady National Park. On the way, we came upon a Hindu festival where the women cook for hours out of clay pots. This was interesting because most people in the state of Kerala are Catholic. We had the opportunity to trek around the National Park at dusk seeing Indian Buffalo (the body of an American buffalo & face of a cow), wild boar, elephants, and monkeys. We also saw prints & scat of leopard, tiger, Indian bear, and wild dogs. I was very impressed by the National Park and how well the land was preserved and untouched by human construction. The landscape reminded me of a scene out of Jurassic Park with the sweeping valleys and small watering holes.

Unfortunately, the next day I became ill with a stomach bug while driving over the hills to our overnight house boat. I ended up sleeping most of our time sailing along the backwaters of Allepy. Our houseboat was beautiful and equipped with 3 bedrooms, a top deck, and a dining room.

Our last few days were spent at the beach in Cherthala. We stayed with the most amazing family at their 'homestay' which in American terms is a bed and breakfast. Greta was the wife of the couple who spent hours showing us her beautiful garden, cooking skills, and 150 saris of every color under the rainbow. We spent our time playing in the warm water on the golden beaches and talking with Greta about life in India. Her sister lives in the USA and is married to a microbiologist who works for theWHO (so cool)!!

After leaving India, I have had time to reflect on my trip thus far. I still have to pinch myself and remember that this experience is real life. The amount of gratitude I feel for all the people who have supported me on my journey here is immeasurable. My perspective of this huge but sometimes seemingly small world is changing. The way in which I handle situations for the rest of my life will be altered. The crazy part is, I am only half way done. Next stop is Mauritius (by Madagascar) for only a day and then South Africa.

-Gabriella



