

December 4, 2015

Time to Explore

November was definitely a month of exploring. After two months of staying in the same place, I was ready for a change of scenery and an opportunity to explore some new places...

One weekend myself and Ruth decided to get the bus to Ooty, which we had been recommended by someone in England who had visited previously. It is a hill station town in the Nilgris Mountains of Tamil Nadu, the state next to Kerala, meaning a different language (Tamil). Looking on a map it was only 100km away, so we thought 2/3 hours max...how wrong we were! We did not take into consideration the fact that driving through the mountains would consist of many steep and narrow hair pin bends that made it impossible to go any faster than 20km/hr, meaning the journey took us 6 hours after school on a Friday evening. I'm just glad I don't get travel sick. The view and sunset that evening made it all worth it though.

We had been told that Ooty would be cold, but being naïve and English we did not take the comments seriously. However, the further up the mountains we got, we could feel the cooler air coming in through the open windows as locals started getting out their woolly hats to put on; we of course were not as prepared. The cold really struck us as we got off the bus in a dark and new place.

We had booked a lovely B&B to stay in for 2 nights, which felt like luxury. But I was glad I had remembered to put in my woolly socks to sleep in, which I did not think I would need to use in India! In the light of the next day we explored Ooty; famous for flowers, oils and homemade chocolates (which made for a different diet to curry!). The women here wore woolly cardigans over saris, which I thought was amazing, I could definitely get used to wearing that every day! We visited Ooty lake, botanical gardens and a tea factory and museum which was very interesting, as well as going to our first English mass since being in India (all others have been in Malayalam).



Ooty Botanical Gardens



View from tea Factory

The journey back on the Sunday was an interesting adventure, as we had to squeeze ourselves onto the most packed bus I have ever been on. This was our first experience of real Indian transport-fighting to get even a

standing space on the bus with our bags. I was so impressed when the conductor still managed to work his way down the bus to collect fares.



The week after was a school trip for class 3-6 to Calicut, the nearest big city which is on the coast of Kerala. The children were so excited as we met at 6.30am to begin our journey. They definitely kept everyone entertained with all their singing and even dancing on the bus, at times I wondered if I was on a party bus not a school trip! Children all brought their own breakfast in 'tiffin' boxes, being on a school trip didn't stop their mothers getting up early to cook curry for them (not something I would think of bringing for a school trip breakfast!). We stopped en route for everyone to eat and big jugs of tea were bought for everyone to share.

First we stopped near the airport where we were able to watch planes taking off which was so exciting for children whom many had never been so close to a plane before. Then we went to Beypore Port, a shipyard for big ships, and walked along a 1km pier in the intense heat (many people had umbrellas) to see dolphins which was amazing!



Children at Beypore Port



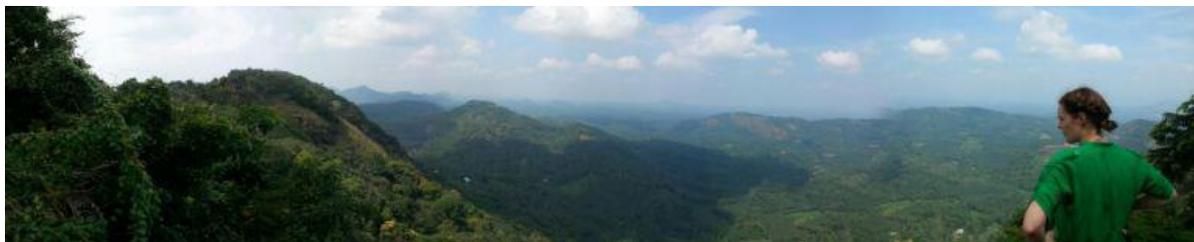
Kozhikode Beach

Next, the main reason for the trip, we took the children to Calicut planetarium which was really good fun for all. It was a science museum with lots of hands on things to do and see, perfect for children, a 3D film and chicken biriyani included. We could easily have spent all day there but after a few hours, we left to have a promised visit to the beach before heading home. This was my first time on a beach in India and it was lovely to be able to have a paddle in the incredibly warm Indian Ocean, and of course have an ice-cream or two!

The last weekend in November, the principal of the school took us to stay in her family home near Pala in Kottayam district, which is a 7 hour bus journey south. It cost the equivalent of £1.50, which I found myself

thinking was expensive a sign I am getting used to the local way of spending maybe! She is one of 9 children; the custom in India is that the youngest son and his new family will live in the family home with his parents until they die and the house will continue to be passed down through the generations like this. We stayed here with her youngest brother, his wife and son. They could not have been more welcoming. I don't think I have ever eaten so much good food in one weekend, I felt like a turkey being fattened up for Christmas!

We were taken to Saint Alphonse's tomb and birthplace [Bharananganam](#) which was nearby. Saint Alphonse is the first saint of India and is very famous here as she was from Kerala. Within only 100 years she was born, died and canonized. We were also taken on a whistle stop tour of the local hills to see some spectacular panoramic viewpoints. 7 hours south and Kerala is just as green! It is starting to become clearer why everyone calls it *God's own country*... Kottayam District is also known for growing pineapples, which we saw plenty of and ate ample!



In the evening, the local church had its feast day celebrations. This is a big deal for the local community. The church was lit up like a Christmas tree; we had mass followed by a feast of tapioca and pork curry for everyone, followed by a cultural programme which included all the local children performing songs and dances late into the evening.

It is now advent, the season of Christmas; however I am struggling to get into the usual festive spirit due to the heat and lack of Christmas decorations. Christianity being only one of many dominant religions in India it does not take priority. Nevertheless, this week I have had the children making Christmas cards and paper chains to decorate their classrooms.

I hope you all have a very Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!!