

January 6, 2016

It's not just about the destination...



Before Christmas I had to say a very sad goodbye to Ignacia and Karuna, two girls who have worked in the kitchen here for two years. The time came for them to take their three day train journey back to Assam in the North East of India. I really got along with them well and enjoyed their company and always high spirits in the house. Their presence has definitely been missed as well as their cooking, singing and smiles!

Christmas holidays saw us on the move again... Part of the excitement of visiting a new place, for me, is always the journey; whether it be by bus, car, train or plane. This month saw me take my first train journey in India and I loved it! In fact I went on 3 trains and they were all very different. We travelled to a place called Alleppey, on the west coast just south of Kochi. To get there it took 5 hours and 2 trains for a total of 85p, not bad! The first train was a passenger train, which meant no advanced booking was available just turn up on the day, and despite images you may see of packed Indian trains, in places such as Mumbai, this was very relaxed and everyone had a seat. The second train was a little busier and as we had not booked in advance we did not have a seat, so were stuck stood at the end of the carriage by the toilets, however this was not as bad as you might think. We got on at a station called Shorenur Junction, a popular spot for changing trains in Kerala, to a train travelling from Kannur in the north of Kerala to Thiruvananthapuram in the south which stopped here for 15 minutes. Enough time for cleaners to come on and do a thorough clean of the toilets, which was very impressive to watch, and for local food traders to come through the carriages with a selection of food and drink from biriyani to ice-cream to smoothies! Definitely a better selection than English train snacks not to mention a much better price. Ten minutes into the journey I realised I was missing out on something very typically Indian, sitting on the edge of the train doorway...probably not something that would appeal to everybody but without a seat this seemed the perfect option! I loved the thrill of it, and I can honestly say that sitting with the sun beating down and wind rushing past and the perfect view of the stunning scenery Kerala has to offer, I could not have had a better view.



So enough about the journey and onto the destination; Alleppey, somewhere I would highly recommend and I have already made plans to go back. We stayed in a lovely area called Thumpoly in a beach hut practically on the beach. From morning walks and runs along the beach to swims in the incredibly warm Indian Ocean to evening beach volleyball, I was in heaven. It was the typical image of Kerala which I had so looked forward to seeing for myself; golden sands, palm trees and the most amazing sunsets!

Early mornings saw the beach busy with local fishermen going out for the days catch on small rafts and then coming back to sort through their nets on the beach. This often included sea snakes being found to be then casually thrown back into the sea from the beach. Somehow this didn't put me off swimming; I think I was more worried about the eagles mistaking my head for fish, as they swooped down from a great height to pluck their dinner out the ocean. We were fortunate where we were



staying that we had 'Mama Rita' to cook for us. The food really was incredible, probably the best I've ever tasted and naturally this included the fresh fish we saw being caught every morning. I was lucky enough to see dolphins one morning and shooting stars one evening, it really could not have been more perfect. Nevertheless we didn't spend all our time on the beach, as much as I easily could have; we explored the busy markets of Alleppey and went on a relaxing boat trip into the famous backwaters of this area.

The third train I went on was from Alleppey to Calicut where we spent our Christmas. This was a long distance train which had the typical Indian train classes and sleeping compartments. Our journey was only 5 hours; we had booked a berth in 2AC which meant we each had our own seat that turned into a bed and curtain making it private. As well as this there were constant traders coming up and down selling tea, coffee, biriyani (of course) and samosas. I loved it!

We were staying with the Assumption community in Calicut, who we had only met once (that time we were stuck in Calicut back in September) but had kindly invited us to visit for the festive period. We thought it was a good opportunity to take them up on their offer and they welcomed us warmly once again. Christmas was fairly quiet with good company and good food, but still strange to be celebrating in such a hot climate! I really enjoyed staying up for midnight mass and coming out to wish everybody Merry Christmas and eat cake and hear a techno Santa sing Jingle Bells!



The last month has seen the children have exams, Christmas celebrations and intense practise for what is most certainly the biggest event in the school calendar...Annual Day. This has been gathering momentum for months, with every child involved in numerous songs, dances, dramas, speeches; hours have been spent practising as well as outfit planning and the last week has seen all other lessons go out the window, as practise has been turned up a notch! The finale is this Saturday, and everyone is holding their breath that it will run smoothly.



One evening before Christmas, many of the local children stayed behind to help decorate the school. This was in preparation for the school Christmas celebration which was on the last day of term. (Obviously I saw this as an opportunity to buy myself a new Christmas sari to wear, so that I could fit in with the other teachers...) This included a lucky dip (yes there were 175 individually wrapped presents under the Christmas tree), sports day prize giving, Christmas message and Christmas carols. The children all thoroughly enjoyed it and it was a great way to finish before our break.

After reading *India of my Dreams* by Gandhi, I was keen to learn more about his life so now I am reading *Freedom at Midnight*, about how he, along with the other leaders at the time, led India to independence from Britain in 1947. This, along with reading daily newspapers when I can and local current affairs magazines, I am finding it fascinating learning more and more about the history and diversity, especially religious, of this vast country and the internal troubles it has continually suffered from.