

March 1, 2016

### More than meets the eye...

February began with the local church, St Mary's in Thelpara, feast day. This is a big deal for every local church which goes out of its way to put on a big celebration for this day once a year. It was a 10 day event with a special novena mass every afternoon, the school even finished early because of it. The final weekend of this celebration consisted of a show on the Friday night, with all the local children performing in songs, dances or dramas. Many used acts or outfits they had used for the school annual day. Saturday evening, there was a candlelit procession which was unlike anything I had ever seen before. Hundreds of people were there, each given a candle to hold while we walked an hour each way to the next small village. There was a band accompanying us playing loud music, while women walked with fancy umbrellas in their Kerala sari's. People had lit up their houses along the route with candles and decorated trees with lights as if it was Christmas. Non-Christians came out of their houses to watch us and joined us for the firework celebration after. I wondered where all these people had come from, this was my first realisation that there were a lot more houses in this area than meets the eye... Sunday was the finale of the feast day celebration, with literally a feast for everyone to share after morning mass. It was great to see the local community come together for this religious celebration and to be able to be a part of it.



As we are coming to the end of our 6 months placement in Assumption School, more and more children are inviting us to their houses to meet their families. This has been a really enjoyable and eye opening experience. It has made me realise that I have been walking around with my eyes shut for the past few months, how did I not realise there was a chicken farm, with 6000 chickens, less than 200 metres from the school for example?! The children have taken us down paths, across streams, up hillsides we did not even know existed due to the thick greenery and rubber tree plantations that surround us. Most houses are completely surrounded by trees so you cannot see them until you are right in front of them. In India, it is custom to treat guests as God. For many this is the first time they have had a non-Indian or even non-Keralan inside their house. We have been treated to many different types of homemade foods and refreshing drinks. As well as papaya, bananas and coconut which we have been enjoying since we arrived; it is now the season for guavas, mangoes, cashew nuts (which grow out of a fruit), bubbly (very similar to grapefruit) and jackfruit (which is the sweetest and tastiest

not to mention biggest fruit I have ever seen), so I am certainly enjoying all these freshly grown fruits that are so rare back home! It is really lovely to see how the children and their families are so connected with the environment and are able to grow such wonderful fruits right outside their front door.

On Friday's since Christmas, I have been helping the 2 new kitchen girls, Angena and Rema (also from Assam) settle into their daily routines around the house. I have no lessons in the school this day so it seemed the perfect opportunity for me to try and learn a few Indian recipes!

Last weekend myself and Ruth headed to Mysore, in Karnataka state, for a weekend break. This was a 5 hour bus journey, which included travelling through two tiger reserves within which we managed to spot a baby elephant on the return journey despite it being dark! Straightaway we noticed the scenery was completely different in Karnataka. We had left the lush green hills of Kerala and



entered a very much flat and dry environment. However Mysore was an absolute gem of a city, which I fell in love with from the first evening we arrived. It did not have the usual chaotic feel of an Indian city, but instead felt very relaxed with lots of open green spaces.



It is the cleanest city in India which was noticeable compared to the usual rubbish heaps you have to wade through on the roadside. It is a city known for its silks and oils, as well as the famous royal palace

and many temples which were much more common than in Kerala, which is dominated by churches and mosques. This meant there were also many more stray cows than we were used to, as they are sacred to the Hindu communities. We found the silk factory fascinating to watch the workers and see real gold being woven into the sari's which were then sold for the equivalent of up to £1000. However much I would have loved to wear one, I definitely wasn't persuaded at that price! The Royal family of Mysore which ruled the Mysore kingdom until independence in 1947, when Bangalore became the capital of the state, still live in the palace which is adorned with incredible stain glass windows, paintings, tiled floors and gold painted steel pillars shipped from England.



Women in both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu traditionally wear fresh jasmine flowers in their hair daily, which I of course decided to join in on.

We also visited the beautiful Brindaven gardens located just outside the city next to a huge dam, and took a bus up the only hill in the surrounding area to a famous temple to walk down the 1000 steps back to the city which many pilgrims walk up.

The last weekend in February, we went on a school staff trip to Wayanad district in North Kerala, 3 hours drive from here. Twenty three of us, including two of the teacher's small children, travelled by the school bus which left school at 5am. We stopped at one of the Sister's family homes for breakfast where her sister-in-law had kindly prepared food for all of us. We went onto visit a waterfall, lake and the biggest earth dam in India. The scenery was stunning. We travelled through tea plantations and up a hill with 9 hair pin



bends that made the journey to Ooty feel like the warm up. I am genuinely in awe of the local bus drivers and goods carriers who daily take this route through the Western Ghats, I don't think you'd catch me trying to drive this route. In true Indian fashion, everyone had brought some sort of food item to share from homemade cakes, unyapoms (a delicious sweet fried cake ball), bananas chips, Bombay mix, oranges, grapes amongst other things which were constantly passed up and down the bus. We definitely didn't require the lunch stop for chicken biryani!