

Stephanie Beech, Thelpara, February 7, 2016

A Night without Electricity...

A region three times the size of South Yorkshire without electricity, for sixteen hours, would most certainly make headline news in the UK. Here it goes almost unnoticed. Although slightly longer than the usual power cut, it is part of everyday life. You may be thinking, "well *she's in rural India, I'd expect no electricity*" but it is a well known fact that [globally more people have access to mobile phones than toilets](#) and these need charging.

When I arrived in late September, through to December, there were thunderstorms nearly every night meaning power cuts were the norm. I got used to reading by candlelight and going to bed early. Power cuts can vary from 5 minutes to a whole day or night; sometimes it is just our house that gets cut, other times it is the whole of the Malappuram district like this one was. Like everything else in India, you cannot predict when or why it will happen; a tree may have been cut down over the wires, or it could have been a monkey or an elephant playing who knows!



I wonder what you would struggle with most about having no electricity for this length of time. Would it be no wifi in your house, no TV usage, no lights or heating on the cold dark winter evenings or not being able to religiously charge your mobile every night? For me, it was none of these things; although a toss up with the fan in my room not working, what bothered me the most was not being able to iron my clothes for school in the morning. Coming from somebody who went through three years at university without ironing a thing, and searches through the ironing pile at home for missing clothes because I never get around to ironing, this is as much a shock to me as it will be for you. However with all the other teachers arriving to school in perfectly pressed and pinned colourful saris, the pressure is on...

Kerala is the most educated state in India, yet it is also the most conservative. Nothing you do, nowhere you go, will go by unnoticed or commented on by somebody. Local women would never dream of getting on a bus or beginning a journey without being immaculately dressed; having their scarf pinned to their churidar (Matching long top and trouser set) in the correct position, or their sari perfectly pleated and pinned in place, with matching jewellery and their long black hair slickly oiled back into a dazzling jewelled hair pin. Pride and most importantly modesty is definitely taken in how you look. I have never seen so many matching



outfits, which are different every day. This is happening right from a young age, with children wearing their bright sparkly dresses on the last day of term and the school becoming a fashion parade.

Clothes are bought, or more commonly tailored, as a whole outfit not simply a new pair of trousers or top. Alongside this new matching earrings are a must, as well as matching bindi and hair pin, and if you have no gold necklace or bangles on you may as well be naked. Jewellery particularly gold, which is not a colour I usually wear back home, is highly adorned by every woman and child right from birth. I have never been someone to take much time over my hair in the morning; with it being so curly it will never do what I want but, here that is not a problem, coconut oil is the answer to everything!



So for those of you who told me, after living in India for a year; I would come back with dreadlocks, a tattoo, and wearing only hippie clothes, think again...it appears I am now a Kerala woman!

This was confirmed, when recently, I spent a few days in Fort Kochi with my parents. Being a very touristy area, I was suddenly surrounded by westerners and their typical bare legs and chests for the first time in months. I definitely felt like I was judging them, in a way only a Kerala woman can do, whilst I was proudly wearing my matching churidar outfit.

On a side note, not having electricity is not an excuse for not doing Geography homework as Class 6 boys thought it was. A week to do the homework and of course they left it until the last night...children are the same the world over!

Special Visitors

Kerala has recently had the pleasure of two very special visitors...no I'm not talking about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit to Calicut but, after four months of being away from home, I was lucky enough to have a visit from my parents! It really was fantastic to see them, and especially to spend my first birthday in six years with them. In total, they spent three weeks in India and I'm happy to say that it appears they have fallen as much in love with the country as I have. I have included their account below, as it beautifully sums up this wonderful country from a new person's outlook...



India is like a kaleidoscope; each turn exposes it in a different light, everywhere we looked there was something completely new and equally exciting. We began in Delhi where utter poverty is laid bare for all to see, then to nearby Agra to see the Taj Mahal before moving onto the green and golden state of Kerala. From the old Portuguese settlement of Fort Kochi, to the tranquillity of the famous backwaters in Alleppey and the stunning scenery of the Munnar

hills, to the spectacular journey through the mountains to stay in the former British hill station town of Ooty, in the state of Tamil Nadu, before returning to Kerala and staying in Nilambur. Finally we flew to Mumbai to see the iconic Victorian-built main railway station (CST), the Gate of India and to experience the insanely crushed suburban trains of rush hour.



The highlight of the trip was, of course, being with Stephanie for two long weekends; one spent sharing her birthday in Fort Kochi and then on an overnight houseboat on the backwaters, and the other spent exploring the area where she has been living and working for the past four months and meeting the staff and students of Assumption Public School. We were able to fully appreciate the fantastic work being done by the Principal, Sister Celine, and the other Assumption Sisters together with the lay staff in providing a high quality of education to the children of local families. We found that, despite varied economic backgrounds, home life for most students is very simple and non-materialistic. We were able to deliver over 350 children's books which had been donated to the school by people in Sheffield including children from Stephanie's former primary school.



During our visit to this area, we were privileged to be invited into the homes of some of the local families. Here we were welcomed with food and drink and were able to experience for ourselves the extraordinary warmth and friendliness which Stephanie has on many a time described.



Amongst the many highlights of the whole trip was a 16km, six hour trek up and down steep tracks through the tea and spice plantations in the Munnar Hills. Our guide,



who seemed to know absolutely everyone en route, showed us black pepper, coffee, tea, cardamom, banana and coconuts growing and being picked, took us to his friends house for morning chai (cardamom flavoured tea) and to a very local eatery for lunch. The curries served were cheap and typical of the fantastic food we experienced whilst in India.

India is a country of contrasts and contradictions; the stunning beauty of the mountains, beaches and backwaters contrasting with the piles of never to be collected rubbish and plastic bottles. Tuk-tuks transporting innumerable school children home (the most we managed to count was 11), scooters carrying families of 4 plus a baby (of course with no helmets), rusty old buses setting off whilst the last passengers are still getting on, overcrowded trains, whilst at the same time luxurious limousines transporting the upper classes to work. The night time calls of birds, insects and peacocks, the constant noise of car horns, market traders and bus conductors shouting their duties by day in contrast with the peace and quiet of the many churches, mosques and temples. The pungent smells of open drains existing alongside the fragrant smells of spice stalls. The tourist touts of the big cities clinging to westerners harder than mosquitoes, the street people and slums of Mumbai and Delhi contrasting with the lavishness of the Taj Mahal. The cows, goats, urban monkeys and stray dogs carelessly competing with people, tuk-tuks, rickshaws, buses and cars for street space, is just another thing to get used to. The lack of clean water, in a land with huge flowing rivers and surrounded by clear water oceans, and the electric power cuts in a country with an abundance of sunshine is incomprehensible.

It is a wonderfully chaotic and frustrating, yet marvellously fascinating country with a population that appears easy going, never seemingly angry and always warm, friendly and open. What an incredible country India is. Most certainly an experience we will remember forever.