



Megan Sherrier is a junior at the University of Richmond studying with MSID in Jaipur, India. She has been selected by the Office of International Education as one of this semester's Foreign Correspondents. The following are articles about her experience.

If you are interested in becoming a foreign correspondent for future semesters contact Catherine Orr corr@richmond.edu

That Whole "Taking the Plunge" Business October 4, 2006

After the 30 minute walk home from class I lie on my bed waiting for the ceiling fan to provide some form of relief from the desert sun.

Within a minute, however, a little girl enters my room eager to meet this strange new person who now lives in her grandmother's house. I exhaust my poor excuse for the Hindi language within three sentences, which my newfound friend understands about as well as a UR student understands the positioning of the soapbox in the Forum.

Thoughts rush through my head. What's a universal game? What Hindi can I speak? Practice the numbers? Ek, do, teen....

Then insanity hits me. I look at the girl...at the floor...and at the girl again. Then I drop down on all fours in an attempt to see whether or not the "animal game" is a worldwide source of entertainment.

The girl's face explodes with excitement and starts shouting "Hautee! Hautee!"
Hmm...I sure hope that word means "elephant."
Okay, next up is the monkey.
"Bandar!"
Note to self: the screeching outside my window is a "bandar."

I proceed to act like a dog, camel, horse, etc., but more notably like a complete fool.

My newfound friend visits often and we practice our animals, numbers, and alphabet together. There's really nothing quite as humbling as being on the same academic page as a 4 year old.

Is this really college? Sure it is, but it's not Richmond.

Instead of dodging club recruiters or solicitors in the Commons on the way to class, I'm dodging cows in the road to get to school.

Instead of figuring out how to get the most food out of D-hall unnoticed, I am figuring out how to eat rice with my hands.

Instead of having midnight pizza and discussing social plans with my roommate, I am having afternoon tea and discussing family with my 62 year old host mom.

Instead of going to the Cellar concert of a local band on a Friday night, I am going to a Folk concert where an 80 year old man shakes his hips while a snake gracefully lounges on his head.

Instead of being comfortable right now, I am continually asking myself, "What just happened???"

That is what it means to "take the plunge": to obliterate your inhibitions in order to discover new cultures, new perspectives, and most importantly, new aspects of yourself that you never knew existed--like discovering your inner elephant, for example.

Two Sides to the Story

14 October 2006

During the first week on the MSID program for development, when everything in India was magical and exciting, the group of 22 Americans took a trip to a village outside Jaipur in order to learn about an NGO microfinance group targeted towards women. Four weeks later, several members of our group returned to spend three days learning about the educational facilities and daily life of these same village people. The two experiences could not have been more of a contradiction.

Scenario 1: The Qualis bustles down what is technically a road, crammed with Americans and their pre-conceived notions of what exactly village life is like in India. Upon arriving, we are streamed with village children and their curious stares. Smiles and shouts of "Ram Ram!" surround us as we exit the vehicle.

The fanfare continues as we are seated under a thatched canopy, facing 30 women dressed in vibrant sarees eagerly awaiting us. Through a translator, we learn about micro-financing loans, and how the success of this NGO-sponsored program has elevated the status and confidence of these women. Everything is positive. We end with an exchange of singing and dancing, in which we are spun around in confusion to the beat of words that we cannot comprehend. We leave the village with smiles and warm-fuzzies, upholding the romantic notion of the village in which we arrived.

Scenario 2: The same Qualis repeats the travel, but this time we are less concerned with the camels on the side of the road and more interested in whether or not the small children in the fields have been to school for the day.

The same initial greetings and dances occur, but afterwards the women return to their fieldwork, and the girls and boys are split into their respective classrooms. One other American and I are shown into the girls' classroom, where we begin with basic introductions in Hindi. When asked, "what is your name?" the first girl looks shyly at the floor, her once bright smile now evaporated as quickly as water in the desert sun. Assuming she is just shy, we move onto the next child. After about four or five identical responses, we catch on. These girls do not know their own names. In shock, we probe further until one girl steps forward.

"I am called the scarred girl." She points to her scar below her left eye. The next girl stands up.

"I am dark." She says this without confidence, or any emotion for that matter.

These negative descriptions continue until the entire group had been identified.

After watching the interaction between villagers and their daily routines for the next three days, we came to see a much different village community than the one we celebrated with that first week in India. Images of graceful women and smiling faces were replaced by toiling children, inefficient sanitation, and a strict social hierarchy that maintained male superiority. I sat back in the car on the 3rd day in complete silence, trying to ignore the deep anger running through my veins at my original conceptions of this place.

How can the same village create such polar feelings? How could I not see this injustice the first time around?

There are two ways to experience another culture. One is the way you want to see it and how others want you to see it--but that mirage can only last for so long. My first trip to the village was as a tourist, curious about something so foreign and unconceivable to my mind that the physical stimulations distracted me from viewing the entire truth. When you take the time to figure it out, however, there are always two sides to the story.

Happy Diwali! **20 October 2006**

My host mother, or "auntiji," wakes me up at 5:00 in the morning and hands me a set of white and red paints. She commands me to make footprints leading into all doorways of the house.

I stop midway, looking down at my feet plastered in paint. What am I doing? I have no idea, but it sure is liberating to play with paint again. I later find out that the footprints are to show the goddess of prosperity the pathway to the home. Thus started my first Diwali experience.

Ever since stepping foot on the soil of India, my host mother, teachers, and every stranger I have encountered has been excited that I would be here to celebrate Diwali with them. After waiting in anticipation like a 5 year old before their birthday, the holiday finally arrived.

Diwali is a festival of lights celebrated by Hindus and Jains to honor the goddess of prosperity, Lakshmi, as well as Lord Ram's return from 14 years of exile. This time of year is also the Jain New Year. My host mother, or "auntiji" kept comparing it to Christmas, which confused me until I actually experienced the holiday.

Errands continued throughout the entire day preparing the house for the holiday. There was cooking, cleaning, wreath making, and candle lighting for hours on end. I took orders without having any clue as to the meaning behind my actions. I was getting skeptical about the Christmas comparison.

After dressing up in Indian clothing, we went to visit relatives. Younger relatives greeted their elders by touching their feet as a traditional sign of respect, and cheers of "Happy Diwali" abounded. Sweets were passed around, and eventually the entire family gathered for worship followed by firecrackers. Throughout the night I was referred to as my auntiji's daughter and treated accordingly.

Then it hit me.

It is not what is being celebrated that makes Diwali and Christmas similar. It is the coming together of family and community to honor and appreciate one another. What made it special for me was the realization that I was included in that family.

This holiday was a major bridge toward the constant relationship building that a home stay situation demands. To come from completely different backgrounds and be able to reach a level of comfort where you can joke as family with one another is such a feeling of triumph.

While there are many times when the home stay experience is a source of discomfort, frustration, and mainly confusion, it is these moments that make it worth the struggle.

This will surely be a Diwali to remember.

Monkey Business

2 November 2006



Upon leaving for India, everyone had their concern:
Are international flights safe?
Are terrorists going to blow up your bus?
Are you going to get some strange illness from the water?

No one, however, landed on the topic that apparently should have been of concern: monkeys.

I'm walking home from school and make it inside the gate to my house, when I notice two monkeys, a mom and baby, jumping around on the porch swing. I stand in amazement, until I am interrupted by frantic shouting in broken English: "Run! Go! Inside!"

I'm confused as to why my neighbor is so scared, and then I see the rest of them....there are a countless number of monkeys jumping from tree to tree and overtaking the roof of my house. They were attacking the laundry line and tearing clothes down.

I rush inside to safety...or so I thought. I hear pouncing, screeching and a never-ending commotion coming from outside. I look out my window to see that the monkeys are now several feet away--and getting closer. One of the larger monkeys jumps onto my window ledge and is trying to pierce through the screen. First, an arm slashes through the mesh. I immediately bolt up the windows, thinking this would keep me safe. I go to the next window to secure it, when I notice a gaping hole in the screen. I lose all ability to move. This was not in the pre-departure study abroad handbook.

Adrenaline takes over, and I run downstairs to the nice, although non-English speaking couple below my room.

Unfortunately, "There's a wild monkey running rampant in my house" is not in the Hindi-English phrasebook. Luckily, the combination of using gestures and the definite look of terror on my face clued them in to the situation.

It turns out the monkey had raided the pantry and was enjoying an afternoon snack. Luckily, he decided not to stay for dinner. I never really know what India will throw at me next, but that's half the fun. While I should probably be afraid to leave my house again, instead I have a newfound confidence. If I can survive this, I can survive anything. Besides, it is not until you face a situation that you will know how to get out of it.

And to think, I used to be afraid of the centipedes in my dorm room...

A Lesson in Flexibility

17 November 2006

For the second half of my study in India, I have the opportunity to intern with a Non Governmental Organization. My specific NGO, I-India, works for the rehabilitation of street children by providing shelter, education, and vocational training.

Upon walking into the basement that houses the program, I am impressed to see boys as young as 8 working intently on jewelry making and handi-craft skills as part of their vocational training. I can't help but to feel uneasy though, as to exactly how I am going to pull this internship off.

My mission: To teach math and English to 60 boys, ages 8-18, some of whom are deaf, blind, or mute, some of whom have been to school and some whom have not, and all of whom speak a language that I have only studied for 7 weeks.

At first, I envisioned a structured learning environment. Talking with the program coordinator, I began to ask some basic questions, which altered my vision completely:

Is there a classroom where I can teach?

His Response: (Pointing to a place where the boys are busy making crafts) You can have this portion of the rug I suppose.

Alright, hopefully the kids can fight distractions well...

Do the kids have notebooks or pencils?

His Response: (Looking around and hesitating) We have some drawing paper. You can cut it in half to make it last longer.

Considering I was on a role, I asked the fated question, even though I had already guessed the answer:

What have the kids studied so far?

His Response: The education initiative is new. The boys have been focused on jewelry making. Some kids will want to learn. Ignore those that don't, and just teach whatever you want for as long as they are interested.

In other words, it became my duty not just to teach, but to start the entire education program of I-India--and I have six weeks to pull it off.

After a week of evaluating what students knew, it became clear that no two students had the same educational background. I could not group kids by age, as I was teaching 15 year olds how to count to ten and 8 year olds their multiplication tables. I could not group kids by math skill as their math level did not equate with their literacy level. In addition, I could not teach using visual aids to the blind, nor could I rely on auditory learning as I would leave out my deaf students.

This past week has taught me more about development, education, and myself than has all of my time spent in the classroom. When you are thrown into a situation, you learn as you go until you produce something successful.

While I am exhausted at the end of the day, these kids are worth it—and they will not leave the program without an education, no matter how I have to teach them.

Dear Creativity, now would be a great time to start working.