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Semester Around the World

Riding on Buses in India

While in Cochin, India, where I attended Sacred Heart College for 10 weeks, I learned how to ride on the buses. It sounds completely ordinary, but each ride was a new adventure. The buses are lop-sided and open-windowed, and they plow down the roads at frightening speeds. My friends from the college called them the “Big Red Killers.” It took a few weeks to learn how to flag the buses down, learn the prices from one stop to the next, and all the while, break the communication barriers between the conductors and the other passengers. After these things were accomplished, I learned that riding on buses was one of my favorite things to do. Sometimes the bus was empty, and I could spend the ride reflecting and admiring the colorful sarees along Thevara road—the street we lived on. Other times, the buses were obscenely crowded, with people hanging out the doors, and bodies running into one another at each turn or stop. These bus rides also provided me with many experiences with local people—time to learn about the Indian culture.

It was during these bus rides that I often realized that I was becoming more and more comfortable with my life in Cochin. One particular experience that confirmed this feeling was an exchange I had with a woman that must have been around 50 years old. Usually, men sit (or stand) in the back of the bus, while the women sit (or stand) in the front of the bus. This particular evening, however, there were so many men that they were occupying the majority of the bus. One man was practically sitting on my lap, and when the woman sitting next to me saw it, she was appalled. Men and women in India do not touch in public unless they are family members or spouses, so this woman was signaling that what this man was doing was not

appropriate. Although she didn't say a word to me, she tapped my knee and signaled that I should move closer to her—away from the man. In addition, she said something to the man, in Malayalam (the native tongue). This short and informal interaction I had was memorable because I felt like this woman was treating me as her own daughter—despite my blonde hair and Western dress. I felt accepted and loved.

This experience was by no means the first time I was treated with kindness and hospitality while in Cochin. Another memorable day in India was day I spent at my friend Sijo's home. His entire family—grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and immediate family—gathered outside of his home to welcome my friends and I. By the end of a traditional Indian meal, all of the young people gathered around the TV to dance to Bollywood videos. Sijo's neighbor Asriba, who must have been about 8 years old, taught my friends and me how to dance like the movie stars. Later, Sijo's mom and aunts adorned my wrists (and my friend's wrists) with bangles—four red bangles. Although these are an ordinary part of an outfit for an Indian girl or woman, these bracelets were particularly special because they were a gift. These gifts were a sign of Sijo's family welcoming my friends and me into their home and their lives.

At the beginning of Semester Around the World, I was simply a tourist—an American girl getting on and off tour buses, being surrounded by herds of vendors. I was often worried about what it meant for me to be an American. I was self-conscious about what other people thought of me based on my nationality. By the time we reached Cochin at the end of September I was ready to settle down and really take in the culture. My desire to observe, and furthermore, become a part of the culture of Cochin was more than fulfilled in my 10 weeks of schooling. At the same time I also started to forget about my insecurities regarding my country. I learned that people, all over the world, were very accepting of me. People didn't care where I was from, but

they wanted to know who I was. After making conversation with a person, regardless of language barriers, I often felt like the person had shared a part of him or herself with me, and I had shared a part of myself. Small gestures and comments were enough to boost my confidence, and I forgot about being timid or over-aware of my nationality.

Semester Around the World was truly the best time of my life. I had countless cultural experiences—in every country I visited—but it was India that made the biggest impact on my life. Being from the West, it was very eye-opening to spend time in the Eastern world. I felt completely displaced initially, but I realized that there were immeasurable amounts of knowledge to learn and digest during my time abroad. This is knowledge that I will use and cherish for the rest of my life.