

# A Word From Aluva

*A Correspondence from a Young Adult Missionary in India*

## Sri Lanka



On one of those typically hot mornings in Kerala, six excited volunteers boarded an air-conditioned plane and headed one hour southeast in the air, arriving in Colombo, Sri Lanka, an hour and a half later. (There was a time change of one-half of one hour.) We stepped off of that air-conditioned plane into an even hotter, more humid climate than the one we had left, if you can believe it.

And so it was, drenched in a new kind of sweat (or perhaps just that much more of it), that we made our way from Colombo's airport into the bustling city. Colombo is much like what you'd expect from any large city throughout the world. There are people and cars everywhere and going every which way. There are odors both identifiable (such as car exhaust and human waste) and unidentifiable (such as, well, who knows, right?). There are many different languages being spoken and a plethora of other sounds to take in all at once. Yes, Colombo is a typical big city; and, for the American visitors, it is one in which you can find McDonald's, KFC, and Pizza Hut. We stayed away from those places, not because we haven't been craving them for six months, but because we were afraid of disappointment. Can anyone, besides an American, really make an American pizza? Doubtful.

We spent the first two days in Colombo, doing the types of things that people do in big cities: riding busses, touring museums, shopping for everything from groceries to new shoes, killing cockroaches, etc. Wait, killing cockroaches? Yes, we did that too! And no big deal, but soon enough, we'd had our fill of this big-city life, so we headed North by bus to another bustling (but not quite as) city known as Kandy.

It was in Kandy that we received our education of Sri Lanka's culture. We met people in the fruit market, where we tried exotic things like jackfruit (biggest fruit in the world), mango (our new favorite food), and other even more exotic things of which I do not recall the names. From the vendors selling along the riverbank, we bought souvenir batik wall hangings, the patterns of which are created by making designs with wax, then dyeing the fabric different colors. We saw traditional Kandian dances, including fire dances in which two men danced on hot coals and touched bright orange flames to their skin and the insides of their mouths. We also learned about Buddhism, Sri Lanka's major religion. From the streets of Kandy, we could look up to the top of a big hill and see a giant statue of the Buddha, inside of which we found a temple run by monks dressed in robes of orange or red. Another temple adorned the land just along the river, and we went there one cool evening to see the relic of the Buddha's tooth. Apparently, we did see Buddha's tooth, although none of us would have recognized it as such. Still, it was a beautiful place, where we saw the reverence and faith of many people.

With those images in mind to help ease the tedium of a six-hour journey, we boarded a train that would take us South to Galle. It is in this part of Sri Lanka that we saw leftover wreckage from the tsunami of December, 2004. Much of the areas – especially those to which tourists tend to flock – have been cleaned up considerably, but there was still damage to behold, as well as survivors to speak with and learn from. When the tsunami actually happened over a year ago, I remember thinking that, as devastating as it was, it was a world away from me. Not so anymore.

But as much as it was a reality check for us, Galle was a refuge from real life. I realize that is quite the paradox, but it is the truth. After we had assessed the state of Galle since the tsunami, we lifted our spirits by taking a ride on a glass-bottom boat, through which we saw so many beautiful fish, as well as the "coral gardens" that this area is known for. Then, following the best lunch we ate on the entire trip, we went snorkeling, swimming, and shopping. We finally allowed ourselves to splurge on activities that we could make memories out of and trinkets that we could make gifts out of (for others or, more often, for ourselves). And, after a long day with our feet in the sand and our heads in the clouds, we fell asleep to the peaceful sounds of waves crashing on the shores just outside our bedroom windows.

This would be a good place to stop, but the story doesn't end there. We headed back to Colombo to spend one more night before catching a dreadfully early flight back to India. Our van came at 4:30, and we were the most tired, cranky volunteers you've ever seen. We perked up, however, when we learned that we'd been upgraded to Business Class on our flight back to India. Business Class? I didn't quite know what to do with myself in Business Class, but I did know I had to give up on simple living, at least for a few precious moments. And that is the perfect ending.



## A Reflection on Cultures:

"Everything you're sure is right can be wrong in another place."

This quote comes from *The Poisonwood Bible*, by Barbara Kingsolver. It is a beautiful book about an American family of missionaries to the Congo, and I read it about five years ago, before I started college. At that point, I had no idea that someday I would embark on my own mission. Here in India, over halfway along on my journey, I decided to read that book again; and this time, the poetic words made much more sense than they had the first time around. A human being cannot help comparing the unknown to the known. That is, in fact, how one finds her feet when she's walking in a new place. In Sri Lanka, I found myself thinking, "This is not how they do it in India." And in India, I have caught myself far too many times thinking, "This is not how we do it in America." But that is because Sri Lanka is not India and India is not America. All of the world's cultures are different, but no culture is necessarily better or worse than another. No, you can't get M&Ms or antibacterial soap in India, but the lack of these things is made up for by the existence of others; and people have been living full and happy lives here without M&Ms and antibacterial soap longer than I can imagine. After living in this unfamiliar place for as long as I have, I realize that India could probably learn some things from America. And America, likewise, could stand to take a few lessons from India. Like individuals, all cultures have something to offer and something to gain from each other. None is right or wrong, and it is the differences that create the beauty.

## Recipe: Fried Rice

I have spent a few otherwise lazy Sunday afternoons learning how to cook a few prize Indian dishes from Jenikia's neighbor, Sara Kochamma. One of the first things she taught us how to cook was fried rice. Now, I don't typically even enjoy fried rice, but it comes as a nice change to the "Kerala rice" that I am fed too many times each day. See, in Kerala, we usually eat rice that is lower in carbohydrates and higher in fiber than the typical white rice known to Americans. This "Kerala rice" has a sort of soft, brown color, alerting us to the fact that it is better for us than plain old white rice. Still, so much "Kerala rice" can get a young adult volunteer down when she is obliged to eat it so darn often. Regular white rice, therefore, is quite a treat, and that makes fried rice, well, like Christmas. Here is the recipe that turned me into a fried rice convert, healthy or not:

### Ingredients:

½ stick of butter; a 1-inch cinnamon stick; 3-4 pods of cardamom; 2-3 cloves; 2 cups of rice; 2 carrots, grated; 2/3 cup of green beans, chopped finely; 2 onions, chopped; 4 cups of water; ½ teaspoon of turmeric (for color); salt to taste; 1 handful of onions, fried; 1 handful of cashews, fried; one handful of raisins, fried; and coriander leaves.

### Procedure:

Melt the butter in a pan on the stove. Add the cinnamon, cardamom, and cloves. Add the rice and stir the mixture until the rice is fried (about 10 minutes). When it is fried, take it off the heat. Leave it to the side. In a separate pan, add the carrots, green beans, and onions. Fry the vegetables. Add them to the rice. After adding vegetables, add the water, turmeric, and salt to the mixture. Reduce the flame and let the mixture cook, covered, until all of the water has been soaked up. In the meantime, fry the onions, cashews, and raisins. When the rice is cooked, sprinkle the fried onions, fried cashews, and fried raisins on the top. Finish it off with the coriander leaves.

## What I Miss Most...

After six months of eating rice at nearly every meal, I have started to have food cravings that sometimes don't even really make sense. One morning, while I was running errands in Aluva, I was hit with a remarkable craving for a bagel. Now, I like a good bagel with cream cheese just as much as the next girl, but I don't know when in my life I have ever actually craved one. I suppose we always want what we can't have. And, since it seems I can't have much that doesn't involve rice in some way, I have been wanting for many of my favorite foods lately. But when I couldn't quite decide if what I miss most this month is pizza, hamburgers, or the simple concept of boneless meat, I figured that what I really miss most is the variety.

## ...and What I Like Best

If there isn't a great variety in the meals I am served here, it is surely made up for in the variety of fruits I can enjoy. Besides having a million different types of bananas (some of which are actually plantains, but who really knows the difference?), India also has the most delicious pineapples I've ever tasted and the easiest-to-peel oranges I've ever seen. And besides these fruits, which you can find throughout the year, as summer approaches, jackfruits, mangoes, watermelons, and pomegranates are coming into season. Out of these choices, mangoes are surely my favorite, but what I actually like best is the fact that, since these foods are so healthy, I don't ever have to choose just one!

## For More Information...

I have come to India via the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM) program. There are currently 37 volunteers serving with YAGM in eight different countries. To learn more about the amazing things that YAGM does, please visit their web site at: [Hwww.elca.org/globalserve/youngadultsH](http://www.elca.org/globalserve/youngadults)

The ELCA's YAGM program is a partnership with the Young Adult Volunteer (YAV) program of the Presbyterian Church (USA). These two programs work together to make this year of service the best it could possibly be for the volunteers. To learn more about the YAV program of PC (USA), please visit the web site at: [Hhttp://pcusa.org/msr/youngadultH](http://pcusa.org/msr/youngadult)

If you would like more information on what I am doing here in India from day to day, please read my blog: [Hhttp://ckerickson.blogspot.comH](http://ckerickson.blogspot.com)

You can also view some of my pictures at [Hhttp://ckerickson.myphotoalbum.comH](http://ckerickson.myphotoalbum.com)

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