



A Word From Aluva

A Correspondence from a Young Adult Missionary in India

Issue 1: September, 2005

An Impression of India

It has been just over three weeks since I arrived in India with the other five volunteers. We landed in Kochi on August 31 at eight o'clock in the morning, and it was already 80 degrees. Since then, the heat has only subsided to allow room in the climate for rain. No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to keep any of my clothes clean for all the sweat and mud. And I've learned to carry my umbrella – and to use it – no matter what the weather has chosen to do.

But I can't dwell on the heat and humidity; we all knew what we were getting into with South India, at least as far as the weather is concerned. Other things, of course, have come as greater surprises. And, while the situation with the climate does call for some adjustment on the part of the American volunteers, it is – at least for me – far from the most challenging part of my life here. (For those who don't know, winter in Illinois just about does me in each and every year; I don't enjoy being cold, and I can't think of anything less fun than playing in the snow! I would take the heat and humidity of Kerala over that any day of the year.) But, in all seriousness, I don't want to talk about the weather; you know South India is hot and humid by now, and I bet what you are really curious about is what this place is actually like.

To tell the truth, I am really still quite curious about that myself. I've been here only three weeks, and with a good 49 more to go, I know I have plenty to learn before I can make any true judgments. Still, I have received my first impression of this place that is to be my home for the coming year. And I believe that first impression is important to hold onto, even after I've developed more informed opinions. Then, in a year's time, I'll be able to look back and see how much I've grown. So, my first impression...

Kerala is a strikingly beautiful place. What else would one expect from the state that is known to all of India as "God's Own Country?" As we were flying into the airport in Kochi, we were welcomed by a forest of palm trees; I have never seen anything like it. I soon discovered that there are palm trees everywhere – along the coast of the Arabian Sea, which we visited our first week; up in the high hills of inland Kerala, which we visited our third week; and right there on the side of the road that I walk every day. It's lovely. It's amazing. The beauty of this place is, in many ways, divine. It is truly "God's Own Country."

At the same time, however, Kerala is astonishingly ugly. The buildings in the cities are old and rundown. There are piles of garbage by the side of the road. Many houses (not all, please understand) are no more than rickety shacks, which I fear will topple to the ground in a little heap of wood, straw, and tarp with the slightest breeze. And there is poverty all around. You won't walk far before coming upon an old man with one leg or a young woman with two babies or even just a completely regular-looking person who is holding his hand out, asking you with his eyes if you have anything to give. And you realize right away that you just can't give to everyone, though you may want to. Even if you could, though, it wouldn't solve the problem – at least not at its core.

That is because the problem is not just a few beggars. No, the problem is hundreds of thousands – maybe even millions – of them. You see, only 10 percent of India's people can afford such luxuries as the items that are advertised on television. Granted, 10 percent of a billion is still 100 million – a large market for global corporations. But what about the other 900 million? What about all of those hesitant hands reaching out in desperate hope? The poverty here is the most devastating – the ugliest – of the things I have seen here in Kerala, and perhaps the ugliest thing I have ever seen.

And still, Kerala is a beautiful place. Kerala is a paradise. It is, perhaps, a small glimpse of what heaven will be like. It is a blanket of green, splashed with the bright, dazzling colors of women in saris and salwar sets. It is palm trees and mountains and gorgeous blue sea. Everywhere I look, I see something beautiful. And everywhere I look, even amidst the ugliness that is poverty and pain, I see God. That is my first impression of Kerala, South India.



Reflection: Living in the Present

Since this journey began, I have struggled deeply with thoughts that either dwell in the past or focus on the future. I am finding it difficult to just be here, in this moment, and I want so badly to be living in each and every moment because they will pass me by all too quickly. In response to this struggle, another volunteer shared the following passage. I share it with you now because I believe these words are applicable to and appropriate for all lives, not just the lives of six 20-somethings who've gone off to have an adventure in India. From Henri J.M. Nouwen's *Here and Now*.

To live in the present, we must believe deeply that what is most important is the here and the now. We are constantly distracted by things that have happened in the past or that might happen in the future. It is not easy to remain focused on the present. Our mind is hard to master and keeps pulling us away from the moment. Prayer is the discipline of the moment. To pray is to listen attentively to the One who addresses us here and now. When we dare to trust that we are never alone but that God is always with us, always cares for us, and always speaks to us, then we can gradually detach ourselves from the voices that make us guilty or anxious and thus allow ourselves to dwell in the present moment. This is a very hard challenge because most of us distrust God. Most of us think of God as a fearful, punitive authority or as an empty, powerless nothing. Jesus' core message was that God is neither a powerless weakling nor a powerful boss, but a lover, whose only desire is to give us what our hearts most desire. To pray is to listen to that voice of love. And if we could just be, for a few minutes each day, fully where we are, we would indeed discover that we are not alone and that the One who is with us wants only one thing: to give us love.

Language Lesson

The official language of Kerala is Malayalam. Although I can usually get by with English, I am trying to learn the language of this culture. And, you know what they say: the best way to learn is to teach!

Hello = *Namaskaram*
(nah-mah-skar`-um)

How are you? = *Enna vishesham*
(ay`-nah vee-shay`-shum)

Good, thanks = *Nallathu, nanni*
(nah-lah-thoo` nah-nee`)

I am staying in Aluva = *Njan Aluva yil thamasikkunnu*
(nyahn Ahl`-oo-ay yeel tahn`-ah-see-koo-noo`)

My home is in America = *Ente veedu America yil annu*
(en`-tay vee`-doo America yeel ahh-noo`)

How To Survive South India

This section is devoted to some of the very important lessons that I have learned living in India. Without this knowledge, I probably wouldn't get through a day, let alone an entire year. Read on to learn how to survive South India...

- Don't worry about dirty feet or dirty fingernails. There is simply no way to keep either of these body parts clean here.
- Learn to like rice; you're going to eat it in some form or other at least twice a day – at least.
- If you hear a car horn, just assume it is meant for you and get out of the way; better safe than sorry, right?
- If someone stares, whistles, or yells at you (and they will fairly often, actually), take it as a compliment.
- Befriend the little salamanders that run up and down your walls. They are completely harmless (if a little startling the first time you see one), and they eat the bugs.

What I Miss Most...



You might be surprised to hear what I have missed most in my first month in India. It isn't silverware; it isn't hot showers; it isn't even toilet paper. But what I have missed most this month is sidewalks. Yes, sidewalks! See, there are only sidewalks in the city center, where the shops are located. Where I live, on the edge of Aluva, there are no sidewalks. There is just one narrow road and an awful lot of traffic that doesn't seem to flow in any regular or orderly pattern. In fact, the traffic is absolutely mad! We all feared for our lives the first time we traveled in a car. And, though I'm getting used to it, it's still a bit frightening to walk down the road. I miss sidewalks!

...and What I Like Best

It will take a little time and a lot of patience to get used to life in Kerala, but there are many things about the life here that I like very much already. Sure, I fear for my life when I walk to work, but I have to say that I sure look fabulous doing it! What I like best about India this month are the clothes. The women of Kerala wear beautiful clothes, made of bright, vibrant colors. We all went the very day we arrived in Aluva to purchase our own. Take a look...



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: 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: <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: <http://ckerickson.blogspot.com>

You can also view some of my pictures at <http://ckerickson.myphotoalbum.com>

If you would like to contact me (and I certainly welcome this), you can do so by email: chester110105@yahoo.com

If you do not have access to email, you can reach me by post at: Charlotte Erickson; The Union Christian College; Aluva – 683102; Kerala, India

**Thank you again and again for your support, your prayers, and your love.
Here is a big hug from the other side of the world!**