

Quondam Travel Scholarship write-up

I often get asked, having returned from my 4 month trip to India what my favourite part of the country was. Was it the bright and bustling markets, the smiley people, the breath taking views? Unfortunately I can never give a straight answer as looking back, there were so many things I loved about the country and so many good memories that I feel I can't possibly choose. My experience in India was the best of my life for many reasons. I learnt about and was embraced by new cultures, I visited places I could never have dreamed I would be able to go and even though at times I felt a bit like a fish out of water, it meant that I was surrounded by new experiences and adventure every day. This trip became much more of a reality last year when I won the generous amount offered by the Quondam Travel Committee. It was then when realised that I would be able to pursue my desire to travel to India with Raleigh International, a youth development programme which is involved with sustainable development throughout rural villages in southern India mainly in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. It works with local NGOs and the government and aims to improve the main problems which face India such as sanitation and schooling. I flew to Bangalore India on the 10th February and this is where my adventure started.

In retrospect the first four or five days were a blur, full of training, practise trekking, overcoming jet lag and adjusting to the scorching heat having left snowy England. The following 10 weeks were to split up into 3 phases of 3 weeks, an environmental phase, a community and a trek. I was firstly allocated into the trekking group which initially I was more than worried about as, remembering the state of my fitness at that time, I wasn't sure I would be able to handle an 18 day trek and pictured myself weeping of fatigue at the back of the group, incapable of completing the 200km. The next three weeks however turned out to be of course, both the physically and mentally draining but also the most exciting. I have never seen scenery and views so beautiful as we trekked through the Western Ghats of Kerala, reaching the top of India's second highest peak, outside of the Himalayas and through elephant forests. At times, it did get very tough in the heat of the day and once or twice I had to remind myself that I had chosen to do this. However, the feeling of reaching the top of a peak or arriving at a campsite after a long trek overrode all negatives and the sense of achievement and fun made it unforgettable. When you walked, it felt as if no other Westerner or trekker had walked the paths before you and this was emphasised by the interest and strange looks given by the locals of the quaint, rural towns we walked through.

My next phase was environmental and we were sent to a small town called Cheriye where we were to build 2 bio-gas systems for two different families. These bio-gas systems create fuel, produced by cow dung to be used in the home so the families don't have to burn wood inside, giving off smoke which harms their lungs. This again was another new and exciting experience as never before had I attempted any kind of manual work and we had to work from 8-6 every day which proved to be tiring for all. We were taught by the local men, who were shocked to see women working, how to use their tools which ended up in a large group the village watching and laughing as we attempted to get to grips with them. It was fantastic to be a part of the village as we were welcomed so warmly and the women would often bring out chai tea and Indian snacks to us as we worked. I loved chatting to the locals, especially the girls my age as we shared stories and marvelled over how different our lives and cultures were. They showed great interest in our 'boyfriends' back

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at home as one girl told me she was low on money as she had been fined several times for simply talking to a boy at her workplace. The village was so vibrant with children running around, chickens, cows, groups of laughing locals – it felt such a privilege to be among it.

Finally, I was sent on my community phase where I would be helping to build toilets for a small village called Koranchal. We lived in tents in the middle of the village and spent our days digging cess pits, bricking and building the actual toilet. By the end we managed to complete 12 which was a great success. Each family showed their appreciation for our work in a different way, with food, flowers and jewellery and by the end it felt as if we were a part of the community as you walked down the paths, you would be greeted and waved to by everyone. The generosity I experienced, given what these families have compared with us was nothing I could have imagined and leaving the village, everyone was in tears – both villagers and venturers.

Having now been back for a while, my travels to India seem like a world away and it is hard to get my head round the fact that the people I met and the places I visited are all still there. I will always remember my time in the country as where I have learnt and experienced the most. India is such an inspirational country and I would love to go back one day. I would encourage anyone who wants to see more of the world to apply for the Quondam Travel Prize as it is the beginning of the experience of a lifetime!