

Marisa's Adventures in India

Part 2



In which the heavenly Ayurvedic treatments are now complete, and it's time to venture out into the world and explore, learn, experience...

Saturday, October 04, 2008

Wow, my head is spinning from another action-packed day...Niika really has outdone herself to provide us an extra-special experience while here, giving us so many opportunities to learn and experience...I am grateful for each moment of this incredible journey...We are now all finished with our healing treatments, so our days will be filled with other activities...

This morning, we left early to go to Pankajakasthuri Ayurveda Medical College, where our speaker from last night, Dr. Velayudhan Nair, works. This was a wonderful opportunity to experience a college of Ayurveda in Kerala, the birthplace of Ayurveda... Dr. Nair greeted us in the front of the large, impressive, multi-storied school, then lead us to the Dravya Guna department, where there are thousands of specimens of every imaginable herb, representing herbal abundance from Kerala. There were hundreds of jars lining shelves, each carefully marked, with specimens of roots, barks, seeds, rhizomes, galls, and more...and glass jars in which the softer parts of herbs were preserved in formaldehyde/water/citric acid (leaves, flowers, stems)...what an amazing resource for the students of this college.



He then gave us a tour of the gardens, which were teeming with hundreds more herbs growing in the sunshine and under the palm trees, many marked for identification, an outside apothecary just waiting for the students to study.

We also got to visit the department where bhasmas are made, which is an extremely potent medicine made from minerals and metals (such as mercury, zinc, copper, etc.) There is a

very lengthy process involved in making this medicine, and it becomes highly purified from a variety of processes (depending on the medicine being made). Bhasmas are banned for use in the U.S., because the FDA really doesn't understand what they are, and one must be quite qualified to prescribe them and monitor their use. They're so intriguing to me, I was thrilled to get to experience where this medicine is made!

Afterwards, we ate at a restaurant – the Indian Coffee House – our first meal outside of Rasa Ayurveda since we arrived over a week ago. What a whimsical building – shaped as a spiral, which winds upwards with tables lining the outer walls. You literally sort of corkscrew your way up to the top, then back down. We had masala dosa, biryani (a fried rice dish), pineapple juice, and a cup of chai – all for about \$1.25 each, including tip! Crazy...

Then, to the bizarre! Shopping! It seems that when you get a group of women together, this becomes a popular recreational activity, especially with prices like these (any surprises there?). We began in the vegetable market, and admired the beautiful bounty of exotic fruits and vegetables. Then, we split up and wandered the winding, narrow streets. I managed to buy numerous gifts, again for mind-blowingly cheap prices. This is where locals shop, not tourists, so the prices reflected that. I bought gifts (mala beads) for 20 of my clients, for example, and spent a total of about \$7.00.



Then, we headed to an herbal medicine shop, and on the way we got a flat tire. This turned into quite a humorous affair. As our driver, Shubash, changed the tire, a whole collection of men gradually gathered around, pointing, offering advice, chatting, making an event out of it. We laughed as each new man appeared, and I think that by the time the tire was changed, there were about 12 men in on the act!

The herb shop was great – a tiny little cubicle, as most shops are here, with piles of barks, roots, branches, etc. bursting from shelves, then smaller seeds, dried fruits, barks, etc. in jars...two men were working the shop, weighing on a counter-balance scale, then wrapping the herbs in newspaper and tying with string. I purchased some vetiver and some inja (which is sort of like loofa, and is used in a similar way for stimulating the skin after first soaking overnight).



Back home for a quick shower, rest and dinner, and then the evening event. Niika had arranged for a guest speaker, Koaleesenatham (along with his daughter Anu), who came to

talk about the devis (Hindu Goddesses). Niika had never met him before, and it turned into sort of a strange evening, as he talked about a lot of things but none of them were the devis, and Niika kept prodding him to discuss this as he was hired to do (and which he is an expert on), but he just never could see his way to the topic. Oh well, it was still quite interesting, and such a satisfyingly wonderful day...

Sunday, October 05, 2008



This was such a great learning and experiencing day (is that starting to sound redundant??)... We spent the day making murivenna oil, in the thatched hut in the back, under the palm trees. "Venna" means "one oil," meaning this is an oil that uses just one oil (in this case, coconut) as opposed to a mixture of other oils such as sesame, castor, etc. Murivenna oil is a traditional oil which is used for wounds, aches and pains, bone injuries, etc. And - I'm pretty sure that they are planning on

surprising us by sending us each home with some of this oil, which after today I have learned is quite a meaningful gift!

It took all 9 of us, plus 5 or 6 of the people who work here, to help, and even with all of that it took about 6 or 7 hours. I am so blown away by just how much goes into making medicines the traditional ways, because even with all of this, in days past it took even longer, since we used herbs purchased from the herb store instead of gathered in the wild, and coconut oil purchased rather than handmade, as that alone would have taken another entire day.

We began with a brief class, and Dr. Geetha laid out samples of all the herbs that would be in the oil, and discussed the reasons for them, etc. We then gathered in the hut, and the herbs were piled on top of cloth on the ground. I wrote the exact process for making the oil in my handwritten journal, but basically, it went like this:

First, we prepared the herbs by tearing, breaking or chopping it into pieces and placing the herb pieces into large urals (metates). We then pounded them with a very heavy ulakka (pestle), and kept adding more herbs, pounding, more herbs, pounding, more herbs, pounding - with 7 different types of herbs, in 3 large ulakkas. We kept this up for a couple of hours, until we had gotten a good upper body workout (and the herbs were totally mashed and the metates were full of herb "juice"). The fibrous parts of the herbs were scooped out, and squeezed by hand to remove all remaining juice. All together, we made several quarts of pure, prana-infused, living, vibrant, rich herbal nectar in this way...



We also pounded shatavari root (my personal favorite herb) on a grinding stone into a paste, to be used as the kalka, or base paste. Also, small onions were chopped and ground into a paste. The bark of the pungun tree was also pounded into a powder and prepared as a decoction. Meanwhile, rice water was being made by the cook in the kitchen by boiling Kerala rice (shastika rice) in water.

The preparations complete, it was time to make the oil. We began placing ingredients into a very large pot (a cauldron, as we like to call it, for those of us who have always liked the idea of making witches brew ☺), beginning with the kalka (shatavari root paste), rice water and coconut oil. The pot was then placed over a palm-frond fed fire, and the stirring began (and did not end for about 6 hours). Coconut oil was poured in, then the herbal juice, then the bark decoction, then the onion paste, one at a time, stirring, stirring, stirring along the way. We took turns with the stirring, of course, and chatted as we did so. It was quite relaxing and fun... And, as Sanju explained, the stirring must be done in a clockwise direction, since this is the direction that movement occurs within the universe, including within the atoms of our bodies, so we need to stir in harmony with this as opposed to against it, of course...(the ancient rishis were aware of the movement of atoms...how cool is that??)...



After hours, then, of clockwise stirring, Sanju began to check it for doneness by pinching a small bit of the herbal “paste” and testing for stickiness – if still “sticky”, it’s not done...but, finally, it was done, and the pot was removed from the fire and the luscious, precious oil was scooped out and strained into a large bowl. Sanju tested the oil by scooping up some and dripping it back into the pot of oil, and watched for a specific pattern of bubbles just under the surface of the oil – and proclaimed it to be 100% perfect!

Yay! Whew. That was quite an event, and just for one oil! The pot was then scrubbed out with coconut husks (I love how they use plants for absolutely everything).

Meanwhile, in the midst of all of this, we had a huge, incredible, amazing feast. Our lunch today was without a doubt one of the best meals of my entire life. Nine courses, each incredibly delicious, served on a large banana leaf. They placed little piles of each dish upon the leaf, every color of the rainbow. It was beautiful to behold, vibrantly alive and sparkling with life and color and fragrance and taste sensation. They served it with 4 different drinks, each brought at just the right part of the meal, beginning with fresh guava/pineapple juice, then a spicy dipana (digestive) drink, then a thick drink that Cody would have loved – sort of a thick cinnamon-y banana drink, and last, a thin yogurt drink that they poured into our cupped hands over the



banana leaf after we were done, to help with the final digestion of the meal. Both Maya and Cody would love that all the meals are eaten with your hands, your right hand in particular - something I'm getting fairly good at - leaving the left hand clean for all your "clean hand" needs.

A bit of health drama today, unfortunately - Tona needed to see a gynecologist for some lab work to prepare her for healing treatments she will receive after we leave, which was a bit traumatic for her, plus disturbing due to the cleanliness (or lack thereof) of the hospital, while meanwhile, Jessica, who accompanied her, became ill while waiting for her...back at home (well, back at Rasa Ayurveda, which is actually feeling very much like home) Ronley started having some digestive problems, followed by Anurada...ugh... And as if that wasn't enough, Dr. Geetha got bit or stung by some little critter and had an allergic reaction and had to be taken to the hospital! Yuck. Gradually, everyone is beginning to feel better, but tomorrow is our big overnight trip down south to Kanyakumari, and we of course need everyone to feel well, so Sanju changed the departure time and tweaked the trip slightly, invoking Ganesh, the Remover of Obstacles (here he's called Ganapataye) so that we could have a fresh start with the trip...so we shall see...

One more fun event did happen before the day was through; our sarees were ready, so we walked over to the tailor's and picked them up, then had to be taught how to wrap them - wow, what an ordeal, I really can't believe women go to all that trouble and wear those hot, sticky sarees in this hot, sticky weather! But alas, they do. In fact, at least in this part of India, the rules of appropriate dress are adhered to 99.9% - they wear churadars with scarf for casual needs, sarees if they need to notch it up a bit, and long housedresses to sleep in. That's it. No other options. There are absolutely no women or girls wearing anything else (well, there are slight modified versions of these for young girls). Boys and men have a bit more flexibility, but basically either wear slacks or lunghis, probably about 50/50. It's hugely important to Niika (and the rest of us) that we honor the local traditions and dress accordingly, so we've all had to scramble to assemble appropriate wardrobes (hence so much shopping). We never go anywhere, for example, without scarves across our shoulders and chest. We have expanded our clothing repertoire to include long skirts and tunic-style tops (along with the required scarf), but that's as far as we venture from what is acceptable. And when you think about it - long skirts and scarves and layer upon layer of fabric in this hot, sticky weather? Where's the shorts and tank tops? In Hawaii, I s'pose, certainly not here...

Monday, October 6, 2008

Thankfully, everyone arose feeling well today, so all of us were able to go on our special overnight trip. Sanju said he had neglected to go temple to bless the previous trip, which is why it befell illness and other troubles. So, last night, he changed the trip (basically just a new departure time, which he then dubbed a whole new plan), then went to temple, prayed to Ganesh and other deities, and brought us back some blessed coconut, which we all ate. And thus, we were all healthy and the trip was a huge success!

So, we left a bit later than planned and headed south in two cars. Driving here is an adventure unto itself. The main goal is to avoid hitting anyone or anything, although by how much doesn't seem to factor in, as missing by just a hair seems to work just fine. For the most part it feels as if you're driving the wrong way on a way-one street, since most of the time is spent in passing, meaning driving in the opposite lane, which then of course means all the other cars, motorcycles and auto-rickshaws are headed straight towards us most of the time. In fact, I guess you could say lanes are sort of more of a "suggestion", since you really are only in your own lane a small part of the time. If there's an opening large enough to squeeze your speeding vehicle through, you do so! Speed seems to be important, which is interesting; everyone drives as if they are in a great hurry, although nowhere else in daily life is there evidence of being in a hurry. To add to the fun, India is in cahoots with England, and everyone drives on the "wrong" side of the road. It pretty much feels as if you're in a battle in a game of asteroids, sans shooting at each other.

So - as we white-knuckled along the crowded roadway, Tulsi started screeching in an indefinable manner, trying to say something but couldn't seem to find the right words. We looked off to the left, and saw a huge elephant, trunk full of vegetation, lumbering along! Shubash (our driver) quickly pulled over, and we all piled out. The elephant lumbered across the road, and we followed. This experience was really sort of bitter-sweet. We had all been eager to see an elephant, and in fact we even got to pet it, but oh my gosh, this was a huge, beautiful, powerful, intelligent creature, in chains. A working elephant, forced to do the will of men... The owner was quite happy to allow us to pet and photograph his elephant, and then of course, he wanted money. Rather a lot, by India standards. We gave him what we felt was reasonable, but he went on and on in Malayam about wanting more, and was still doing so as we drove off. This is a land which evokes such a mixture of feelings...

On a positive note, Nikka told me later that there are many elephants here who live at temples, and who are treated like royalty - coddled, loved on, and even given pancha karma treatments each December! I would love to see an elephant receiving abhyanga...!!

Continuing on our way, we headed to Medicine Mountain, which turned out to be one of the most special events of my entire trip. One of the tales of the Ramayana (classic Indian story of spirituality) is about a great battle in which many people were injured and dying.



Hanuman (the monkey God), in order to help the people, bounded in a giant leap to the Himalayas to get medicine, but was unable to identify which plants had healing properties (he could jump across oceans but couldn't identify plants, kind of comical really)...anyway, he decided it best to just take the whole darn mountain full of medicine, of course - and as he flew through the air, mountain perched upon his palm, a bit of it fell to the ground, and this "bit" of the Himalayas is where we went today.

This mountain was pure magic. The sacredness of this holy place could be experienced at every turn. We parked at the

base, and with the help of a guide, walked slowly up it. Every few steps there was something sacred to behold, beginning with the modest home of a living saint, who came to his doorstep to greet us. Small shrines, carvings of deities, holy messages of love and oneness, meditation caves, temples, medicinal plants - all of these and more were at every turn. So where do I begin?? I think I was most moved by the temple, which was deep within a cave, and attended by a swami. He chanted, offered us holy water to drink and sprinkle upon our head, smudged our foreheads, offered us blessed fire, told us in Malayam how this is the holiest of temples, since it is made not by man but by nature...and indeed, I believed him...

Another cave, into which you have to duck low and crawl into it, which then opens into a shrine for meditation, was also deeply meaningful to me... We sat and meditated there for awhile, and I felt as if my soul was swimming in a sea where countless saints have swum before, where enlightenment had been achieved, where lives changed and insights realized. I drank it in, allowed it to permeate into the deepest levels of my being, and was deeply moved by the experience...



Further up the mountain was a small shrine overlooking the jungle below and sea beyond, and from there we could see Kanyakamari, at the very tip of India, where three seas converge, and where we would go next. Again, we took turns crawling inside the small shrine and meditating, this time with a gentle breeze caressing our senses.

Along the way, Sanju pointed out healing plants, and we tasted, touched, smelled and experienced them...

A snack of nuts and raisins near the top, then back down...I must admit that I ducked into the cave temple again as we were headed down, it was just so moving to me, I couldn't resist another opportunity to venture inside...

After Medicine Mountain, it was only a few more kilometers to Kanyakamari - the edge of the world, the tip of India, a holy place where three oceans converge - the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Sea of Bengal. We checked into our hotel - Hotel Trivenna, which means "three waters". I was fortunate to get my own room (everyone else had to share)... it was quite clean and nice, and interesting in that we needed to provide our own sheets, towels, toilet paper and soap - something that is apparently quite common here. There was a bucket and faucet in the bathroom in lieu of toilet paper, but I think I prefer the American way...☺

The snacks eaten on Medicine Mountain had worn off, and we were starving, so we headed for a quick lunch at a small restaurant nearby...it was even air conditioned, pretty much the only air conditioning we've experienced the entire trip, except for in cars...then, a short walk to a boat landing, and a boat which took us to Vivekanda Temple, which sits upon a rock just

beyond the shore. This beautiful temple was built over the spot where Vivekanda, the wandering swami, came to sit and meditate in 1892. He sat upon this rock for three days, at this sacred juncture of three seas, and from this meditation he came to realize his life's mission; to bring yoga and eastern philosophy to the west....the first to do so, and the one to whom the yoga movement in the US is attributed...certainly a huge contribution to the world! Shortly after this meditation experience, he was a speaker at the Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, at which time he introduced Hinduism and eastern philosophy to the west.

It was a short boat ride to the island housing the lovely temple. The temple was full of beautiful carvings and historical plaques. Also on the island was a meditation cave which was filled with meditating people sitting upon the floor facing an illuminated OM, with the sound of OM playing continuously in the background... It's always an incredible, powerful feeling to meditate together with so many, especially in such a sacred place...

We took the boat back, then visited the Gandhi memorial and a small monument to those who died in the tsunami a few years ago. This area was hit by the tsunami, although it is with a great sense of wonder that Vivekanda Temple was completely unaffected. The temple was full of visiting people at the time, and yet no one was injured and there was no damage whatsoever on the small island...everyone attributes it to the grace of Vivekananda, and the divine...



And then, sunset on the beach – an explosion of color backlit the Vivekanda Temple and the adjacent island on which perched the huge statue of the Tamil poet and saint, Thiruvalluvar (we didn't get a chance to visit this island, unfortunately). The beach was packed with people, 99% Indians (we have seen very few westerners anywhere in Kerala)..along with loads of people hawking goods, including many who apparently don't understand the words "no thank you" ☺...

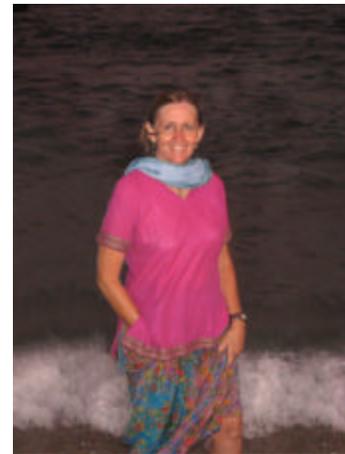
We were then set loose for a bit of shopping and dinner. We decided to sort of "go for it," and chose the best restaurant in town – white table clothes, black-tied waiters - the Sea View Restaurant – and ordered course after course, along with pineapple lassi and coconut pudding – plus 5 litres of water to take back to the hotel – and even though we tried, we still were unable to spend more than \$7.00 apiece, including a generous tip.

Back in my room, exhausted, I took a nice bucket shower, then collapsed into bed, a contented smile upon my lips...

Tuesday, October 7, 2008

I was awaked by a loud rap on my door at 5:00 am, Sanju's wake-up call...I dressed quickly, and we headed to the beach to watch the sunrise over the temples, monuments and deities, the emerging day over the three seas...an amazing and impressive sight...it seems no one in India sleeps in, as no matter how early I arise, most everyone is already up, and this was certainly no exception - the streets and beach were packed, as if it were noon in Laguna Beach...everyone was heading to the shore to watch the vibrant sunrise and welcome the new day. And this was a day to welcome with relish, and it was another amazingly special day in Kerala...

After admiring the sunrise, we ate breakfast at a small open air restaurant (well, actually, they're all open air), and then walked a short distance to another temple, this one devoted to goddesses...it was dark, mysterious, and ancient... It seemed as if it were buried deep underground, as there were winding passageways leading into and through it, but in fact it was not. There were dark carvings adorning the walls and passageways, and shrines to deities tucked here and there..we each purchased a small tray of oil lamps, and made an offering of them to one of the devis (goddesses)... It seems Westerners are generally not allowed in this temple, and it was only by grace (and some rupees, apparently) that we were able to visit it, and even then we were herded around by a man, who was quite concerned with making sure we followed all the rules...as always, no photos were allowed in the temple, and at this one, they even required that we check our cameras (along with our shoes, of course) at the door... While there, I purchased some mala beads, from the temple of the goddesses, to dip in the three seas...this is a common practice here, and so afterwards, a few of headed to the beach to dip our malas...



From there, we drove a short way to visit a beautiful beach nearby...as we walked towards the beach, we came upon several peacocks wandering about - peacocks are the national bird of India, and are quite honored here...

Then, it was time to head a couple of hours north, back towards Rasa Ayurveda, for a special event planned at the home of Sudha, one of the wonderful staff members of Rasa. Along the way, though, another unexpected and very wonderful thing happened...on either side of the road, perhaps a half or quarter of a mile long and wide, were lakes filled with lotus flowers!! In full spectacular beautiful pink bloom! It took my breath away, as I've always had such a love of this special flower...unfortunately, we had only a moment there, as we were running late to Sudha's house...I was feeling a bit disappointed, and then looked up, and saw Vishek running towards our parked cars, his arms laden with lotus flowers, freshly picked, one for each of us! Vishek is the most delightful young man imaginable, so helpful and charming and absolutely adorable - his face lights up a room, and he smiles all the time, while serving us food, taking care of us...and, today is his 21st birthday! And he was bringing us the sacred lotus blossoms! How special is that?? I had never had an opportunity to

experience them in this way before, and Sanju showed us how to sort of pull back each petal and reveal another behind it, and then more behind that, and more behind that, and so on.... I do believe they are called "thousand petaled flowers" for a good reason, as I think there are about that many, it seems – and the very center was still warm from the sunlight...the scent was fresh, and delicate...was a treat this was! There was a man in the lake, floating in what amounts to a large bowl, and he was harvesting the lotus flowers by scooping them into the "bowl" in which he sat, until he was sitting in a bowl filled with lotuses in a lake filled with lotuses! Does this paint a lovely enough picture???

And yet, this wasn't even the main event...so onward we went, to the home of Sudha. She lives down a dirt road, buried in the jungle, in a small, simple home of concrete...the homes here are totally integrated into the world around them, so that they live both indoors and out, with living areas in front, back, and all around. We were invited there for a very special reason: to have a chance to connect with a group of local men and women and discuss medicinal plants...so, as we arrived, we caused quite a stir in the "neighborhood", our group of western practitioners of Ayurveda...I'm not sure who was more excited, us or them?? (I think me...) We first were brought into a room in Sudha's house, where we sat around a large table and were served a fresh coconut, hole drilled in the top with a straw sticking out...a lovely refreshment to welcome us to their home.

After this, we were taken out front, to sit in some chairs set up for us under a tarp – all of us, and about 11 or 12 local people. We were all beaming with excitement – us and them, and we began with going around the circle and introducing ourselves. They clapped enthusiastically after each name, as we each said our names...then Sanju and Niika spoke (in English, then Sanju translated into Malayam)...and discussed the importance of preserving the traditional ways, of using "kitchen medicine", and teaching the children of it, and not letting this sacred wisdom die. We discussed how disconnected most of us in America are from nature, and how once lost, it is hard to reclaim. They listened, and smiled, and nodded their heads. And then, we opened it up for them to talk, and they could barely contain their enthusiasm – they sent kids scurrying in every direction to gather plants growing in the jungle all around us, and as the medicinal plants were brought to our circle, they began telling what each of them are used for, and had us taste and smell them. One of them was used for coughs and sore throats, and it was so deliciously sweet tasting I ate a whole branch full of leaves! It left a wonderful feeling in my throat, reminding me much of the taste and effect of licorice. It was so wonderful to witness their pure enthusiasm and desire to share the bounty that surrounds them. We had brought plants with us to give as gifts to them, and we did so now – brahmi, aloe, and coleus.



A few of the women disappeared inside to prepare lunch for us, and I started to wander around and take pictures. I snapped one shot, and one of the women motioned for me (along with Tulsi, who was outside also) to follow her... I had no idea where we were going, but she started pointing out various plants and talking about them in Malayam, smiling and enthusiastic...then she lead us a short way to her home, basically all part

of the same compound in the jungle, and first showed us a picture of her son, who is a young man; the only word I could understand was “pharmacist”, and along with her proud smile it was clear what his chosen profession was..and then, she brought us to the back of her modest home, and through a door into a small room. With huge pride on her face, she showed us her handmade wooden weaving loom, and sat down into a hole in the floor that allows one to work the loom from ground level, and began working the loom, demonstrating it to us...wow, again, how cool! (I just love this stuff!)...Her husband appeared carrying some beautiful pieces of cloth that she had made, white trimmed with gold, which is the traditional Kerala cloth...we weren't clear if they were offering it for sale or just what, but apparently they were, for 160 rupees, which is about \$3.00 (the fabric turned out to be a lungi, which is about 3 meters of fabric, and which takes about 4 hours to weave)...hmmm...should I buy it??? Let me think... package happily in hand, we headed back toward the main house, and lunch, served in the main room, on banana leaves...a delicious rice dish (called beriyani), with vegetables, raisins and other yummy things in it, along with an onion raita, tamarind, and pink herbal water..absolutely delicious!

It seems this is a neighborhood of weavers, and afterwards we drove to a very small village nearby where a number of weavers live who operate a more “large-scale” weaving business – a palm-frond covered hut with 15 or 20 weavers at work, all sitting on the side of holes dug into the ground, weaving away on handmade wooden looms – the looms made a wonderful wood-on-wood sound, clacketing together in wonderful melody.

Yet alas, the day was not yet done. Some of us headed back to Rasa, and others (including me, of course) headed to Kovalum Beach, to check out a Kerala “beach scene”. What a charming beach! Lined with palm trees, quaint shops, a lovely little island, villagers selling their wares – it was delightful. Yet all any of us could think of was swimming in the warm Arabian Sea. Women here don't wear swim suits – they basically wade in their sarees, perhaps take an occasional dunk fully clothed. So OK, no problem for us – we ran to the shore and dove in, fully dressed...I was wearing a long skirt and tunic top – they floated in the water around me as we frolicked and played and laughed and soaked up the wondrous warm waters...it was so heavenly! We got home late, ate dinner, then collapsed into bed...what an amazing journey!

Wednesday, October 8, 2008

This morning got off to a leisurely start, which was nice – we didn't leave until about 9:30, then headed into Trivandrum to the Sree Mahaganapathy Temple (the temple to Ganesha). We began with purchasing a coconut from one of the vendors lining the street in front of the temple, then went inside and smashed the coconut against a stone wall (pretty fun, and actually easier than I thought it would be. The men there were impressed, because apparently usually the Indian women hand the coconuts to men to smash for them, but we got really into it). Anyway, Ganesha is the deity known for being the “remover of obstacles”, and it's common to pray first to Ganesha before other deities, since first obstacles must be removed before anything else can happen. Smashing coconuts in this way symbolizes breaking the hard shell of the ego, and then surrendering it to allow the sweetness of our true selves to be revealed, opening the way for ego-less transformation. This was a lovely

temple, quite open and airy, colorful and vibrant. It's interesting how different each temple is, how they each have a feel, an energy of their own – and yet each is the same in so many ways as well.

Next, we went to the home office of Dr. Kumari Rajani, a bone and marma specialist. She lectured to us on marma (energy centers of the body) and treatments for bone and nerve injuries. She also demonstrated a few treatments for us. Dr. Rajani is one of the consulting physicians who works with Rasa Ayurveda, and I was very impressed with her. For those who need marma treatments, they could stay at Rasa Ayurveda and receive abhyanga, shirodhara, etc., and receive marma treatments from Dr. Rajani.

Back at Rasa, we spent the afternoon learning how to make leaf bundles for use in a traditional Kerala treatment called “pathrapodala svedana.” So, more play time with herbs! As usual, Dr. Geetha was extremely well organized, and piles of herbs were waiting for us, along with bowls, cutting boards and knives. I must mention that during our excursion down south, we kept making frequent stops while driving, and Sanju and Vishek would jump out, run into the jungle, and return with armloads of herbs. Today, we got to put those plants to use – and we began by cutting and chopping them into little bits. I was reminded of when I was a child and I used to love to make soups and potions with plants, sticks, flower petals, anything I could find, then pretend it was dinner or medicine...and here we were again, only this time it was for real...chopping piles of leaves of varying descriptions upon a cutting board, and filling large bowls with the green manna of the earth! So fun...Then, a large pot was placed over a flame, with some neem oil in the pot, followed by some cut up pieces of lime. Then, the leaves were placed in the pot – handful after handful - and we cooked and stirred the magical potion. After a bit, it released a rich aroma into the air, and Dr. Geetha announced, “that's it – it's done.” Off went the flame, out came small squares of cotton fabric, into which large spoonfuls of the mixture was placed. We carefully tied the bundles together with string (and retied, and tied and retied, until we got it right – an exacting process so that when used the leaf bundles don't fall apart). Voila – leaf bundles, to be used on each other tomorrow.



Following this, we had a demonstration of shirobasti, which is a practice of containing herbalized oil in a dome-shaped container upon the head. This is an excellent treatment for nerve disorders and other conditions of the mind and nervous system. It's rarely done in the U.S., largely because it's best if you shave your head first, however it seems most Americans object to doing this, can you imagine?! But, we learned how to do it without shaving the head. Tomorrow, we will practice this on each other, along with the leaf bundles...

After the shirobasti demo, the Kerala monsoon season arrived with a boom. Literally. Until now, we've had nothing but sunny skies each day (well, occasional cloud cover but no hint of rain). That all ended today...As we were sitting in the gathering room at Rasa this afternoon, we heard the loudest **kaboom!** any of us have ever heard – truly, it was that loud

- like someone had just dropped a bomb on our clinic. No indication it was coming, no faint warning rumbles, just an insanely loud and sudden BOOM. It was crazy - we all screeched, jumped up, and sort of ran in circles for a few minutes trying to figure out what the heck was going on (we actually did think it was a bomb for a moment), until the realization finally struck that it was a HUGE clap of thunder! So finally, dramatic weather. One thing that has been a constant ever since I arrived, until now, is the weather; hot and sticky, day in and day out...although, we are fortunate in that this is the cooler season, so it's just been hot instead of HOT. It also cools off slightly at night, which helps with sleeping...but I digress, because now, we were suddenly having real weather, and yay! I'd been wishing for this.

I ran outside and plopped down into a hammock, and proceeded to lay back and watch the approaching storm through the coconut trees. It was right at nightfall, so it was an especially wonderful time of day. There was no more thunder, but the sky was completely clouded over, with streaks of silver lightning shooting across the sky from time to time. A nice breeze picked up, swaying the coconut trees...the weather turned fresh, and crisp, with a sweetness to the air, then a slight mist began to fall...yep, it really was as wonderful as it sounds...and then Ranju appeared, delicately cleared his throat, and began taking down hammocks, his way of indicating that the party was over, I needed to go in so he could take down the hammock. Which was perfect, because then the serious rain started, and I sat outside under an overhanging, enjoying it immensely until dinner...

This evening was a special night of puja (ceremonial practices) honoring Saraswati, the Goddess of learning, knowledge and music. Tomorrow is Saraswati's day, a yearly event, and is a time for placing one's awareness upon learning and knowledge. A puja generally begins with lighting incense and using it to smudge images of the deities which are on the altar, while ringing a bell and honoring each deity. For tonight's puja, we were asked to bring all instruments of learning and lay them upon the altar. So, out came our books, journals, laptops, anything and everything of significance that plays a part in learning. The objects became a part of the puja, and were blessed by Saraswati, and left on the altar all night. In this way, the objects were freshly energized, ready for another year of providing learning and knowledge. The next morning, after a special morning puja, the objects were available for us once more, energized and better than ever!

Thursday, October 9, 2008 and Friday, October 10, 2008

These two days, the last two at Rasa, sort of blur together in my mind, as I received troubling news from home which threw me off track for a few days...but it is important to keep the memories of this special time alive, so I will recreate the events as best I can...

I began the day on Thursday with hiring a car to take me into town to get a camera. I've been using Niika's camera ever since I arrived (mine broke in Singapore, within the first few hours of using it! Ugh...), and I will need my own when I travel alone at the end of my trip (which is quickly approaching!). At first the driver took me to a very expensive, exclusive camera store, and I couldn't afford anything there. Then, he offered to take me to a part of town where I could buy a stolen camera for cheap...hmm...tempting, but no thanks...and

finally we ended up at a more reasonably priced store, and I finally was able to obtain a working camera of my own. So glad about this!

When I returned to Rasa, we practiced using the leaf bundles on each other. We worked in groups of three, with one person receiving the treatment and the other two performing it. Two bundles are used at a time, and are warmed in oil. Then, each therapist grasps a bundle, taps her hand with it, then taps the feet of the patient to verify it's not too hot, then in a specific pattern taps and rubs the slightly abrasive leaf bundle all over the bundle, re-warming it in the oil after each movement pattern...this is a treatment that is pacifying to kapha, somewhat pacifying to vata, but tends to aggravate pitta.

In the afternoon, we did shirobasti on each other (retaining warm herbalized oil on the top of the head), and honestly, for me it was just what the doctor ordered. It really helped me to regain my center of calm after it was thrown off by events at home...it was perfect timing. Whew. The evening was fairly casual...we sort of just "studied" for the test tomorrow, because yes indeed, Dr. Geetha has prepared one for us!

Niika's birthday was yesterday, and we all chipped in on a statue of Saraswati for her, which we sneaked onto the altar when we did the special Saraswati puja (so Saraswati blessed Saraswati). Niika loved it. Tonight, the staff here had a birthday celebration for her on her Malayam birthday. It turns out, they have an entirely different method of tracking births...it's based on the star under which you are born, not the day you were born. Each star has its own day, and it is that day that is celebrated. Everyone knows their star day, but few know the actual date of their birth, or even, if I understand it correctly, their exact age. Experiencing other cultures is endlessly fascinating...

The next morning, we took our "test", which was actually quite a good review. We had a written test, then went outside to identify 25 medicinal plants. We were all amazed at how much we had learned while here. Dr. Geetha has been an incredible, dedicated teacher.

After our test, a group of us went to the bank in town to get money to pay tips to everyone here and for spending money during the next few days on the road. We stopped by a bookstore while in town, and found great books at cheap prices - but couldn't do too much about it, since books are so heavy. I could only buy one - "Ramayana."

Our lunch today was special - a feast served our favorite way - on a banana leaf. It's our farewell lunch, so the cooks went all out. It was so delicious!



In the evening, some local girls came over and we did mehendi (more commonly called henna). There is a mehendi tree (I think it's also spelled "mendhi") behind Niika's house, and the girls gathered some leaves from the tree. The leaves were chopped up and mixed with water, and this forms the paste for doing artwork on hands and feet. We spent the evening painting each other

with this green paste and chatting. Mine was done by an adorable local girl, age 12, who beamed the whole time she worked on my hand. I think she was really impressed with my white skin – at one point, she turned to me and said “you have very beautiful hands, maam,” which is nice to hear but they’re actually pretty regular for a white woman! The fascinating part of this process is what happens after leaving the mendhi paste on for awhile (until dry, about 2 hours). A mixture of sugar and lime is used to “set” the design, then it’s all washed off – and designs in a deep orange remain. Orange from those green leaves? Oh, the marvels of nature...

This evening was time to bid farewell to our wonderful host, Sanju. He has been truly so good to us, so dedicated to our well-being and to ensuring a meaningful experience. I feel so grateful for everything he has done! And, this evening proved just how dedicated he is... Late in the evening, it was time for him to leave, and we all gathered together. He chanted for us in his deep, melodic, beautiful voice, then we said our goodbyes...about 15 minutes later, we heard him downstairs; he came back, wanting to offer us one more experience before leaving. We had recently had occasion to have some “coffee tea,” and we were all intrigued by this. He decided to give us one more cooking lesson...so at about 9:30 at night, after a busy, full day, he pulled together the ingredients, set this up in the kitchen, and called us down for one more cooking class. Coffee tea is a blend of masala spices, with a very small amount of coffee – mixed together and cooked in a pot. It was so delicious, and even more so since it came straight from his heart...

Saturday, October 11, 2008

This morning, I got up early to finish packing and say my goodbyes. There was a sweetness to the goodbyes, with only a tinge of sadness – we all feel so blessed to be on this trip, to meet these wonderful people, to experience this ancient land, that truly all that one can feel is gratitude and a knowing that many of our paths will cross again. All of our lives are changed, forever...we hugged, held hands in a circle, felt the gratitude of coming together in this way. Then, five of us hopped in a taxi and headed to the seaside town of Varkala (Ronly, Tulsi, Jessica, Anurada and me), about an hour’s drive away, and to the bamboo huts I reserved a few weeks ago...

...How often does it happen that one dreams of something wonderful, and then it comes true, only the reality is even better than the dream? This surely must be rare. And yet, I am finding this to be the case at every turn on this trip, including in my most charming of new homes, the Kerala Beach House. Before coming to India, I dreamed of staying in a little hut by the beach, and here I am - staying in a little bamboo cottage, steps from the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean. The cottage is absolutely charming beyond charming. Thank



heavens for my new camera, perhaps it will do better justice than my words can; but I will try.

A small porch, with a low brick wall and parquet floor, serves as the entrance, and is where I am now sitting, feeling the gentle ocean breeze, listening to the birds and the exquisite sound of crashing waves and a peacefulness that is indescribable. Entering the cottage, the walls are dark wood, and straight ahead is a wooden bed nestled in a head-and-foot-board engraved with numerous images of India. The walls also are similarly adorned, with hand-painted images of scenes of India; gods and goddesses, scenes of nature, seaside scenes. The windows are open to the world, with bamboo bars across them, and shutters if I wish, although I prefer the air to flow through. And – the best part – is my bathroom; four walls decorated with bamboo, a tile floor, and that's it. Meaning – no roof, except for the coconut trees gracing the skies above, brimming with coconuts. Perfectly private, unless I decide to become concerned about the view of the birds, which is highly unlikely. A nice shower – in fact, I had to test it out soon after arriving, with cool water and no hot, of course. Hot water is scarce in India, unless you heat it yourself over a fire. But who needs more heat? Cool does the job of refreshing one's body and soul quite nicely here.

My hut is nestled amongst a small group of huts, sort of a tiny bamboo hut village. I'm quite sure my hut is the best one, though – closest to the ocean, and the only one with the open air bathroom (which, by the way, is attached; this is not an outhouse, but a small room attached to my hut).

This is an area of spectacular beauty. Lush, green cliffs overlook rocky, warm beach below. The cliffs are dotted with little restaurants and small shops. Steps lead to the beaches below and the Arabian Sea. It looks very much like a tropical Laguna Beach...rockiness, steep cliffs, spectacular vistas at every turn...

The feeling I am having is truly exquisite...

OK, it's now a few hours later, early evening...I was showering in my outside shower after swimming in the deliciously warm Arabian Sea (I just love saying "Arabian Sea", I have to admit, it's just so exotic and cool), when the lights went out for the evening blackout...I dried off and lit candles, and placed them all over my room...so I'm sitting in my beach hut, which is now all aglow with soft, warm candles... I do realize this isn't for everyone... at any time while in my bathroom, a coconut could fall on my head, and there is a fairly steady drizzle of small blossoms and seed pods sprinkling upon my floor...it's actually quite a bit like camping, but comfortable camping in a bamboo hut at the beach in India, on the shores of the Arabian Sea (have to keep throwing that in, just for fun...)...but it sure is for me...I've never slept under a mosquito net before, but tonight is the night...yep, there are a few mosquitoes and frankly, I just don't give a damn, a mosquito net will do just fine...

It's now a few days later, and events of the last few days sort of blur together, so I will recall the highlights...monsoon season has indeed arrived, and each day in the late afternoon, thunderstorms build up and rain falls.... A few nights it has rained all night, and I lay in bed, listening to the soft sound of rain falling upon the roof of my little beach hut.

The first night that I awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of rain, nature was calling, and yet it was raining in my bathroom!...so, I climbed out of bed, fished through my suitcase, found my umbrella, and proceeded to use the umbrella in the bathroom...how often does one get to experience that??? As I said before, not for everyone, but certainly for me...

My friend Jessica was staying in the hut across from mine the other night, and in the morning she mentioned that her roof leaked all night, as it had been a rainy night. And then she happened to mention to me: "By the way, did they bring you a fresh coconut last night?" To which I replied no, and she brought me into her hut, and lying upon the floor was a coconut, just sitting in the middle of the room....hmmm...I looked up, and saw a tear in the ceiling....hmmm.... "Jessica, I think a coconut fell through your roof last night!". And we both burst out laughing, and sure enough, this is indeed what happened! The manager here immediately moved her to a new hut, and repaired the roof...

I've had a chance to sample many of the local restaurants here, all of which face the sea...it's interesting, all the food here is basically the same... One thing I have learned about India and cooking is that the point is not to cook creatively, but rather to cook "correctly"...so the best cooks here cook dishes very much as they have always been cooked, very precisely, and deliciously. As it turns out, Varkala is a popular haven for tourists, which is a bit of a disappointment to me (someone who loves to go where tourists do not) but ah well, how can they all resist? It is, at least, an international crowd, representing every country and language imaginable - and the restaurants try to cater to them all. So, the restaurants have extensive menus offering a smattering of Indian, Chinese, Italian, American, French, English, etc. food...each restaurant has about the same menu, and all prepare the dishes in the same way. I had pasta the other night (yes, I know, I'm in India and eating pasta - but I have certainly had plenty of Indian food while here and was ready for a change)...and I ordered a dish with a creamy tomato sauce...local ingredients are used, of course, so for the creaminess, coconut milk was used! Quite deliciously, I might add. I also have had eggs and potatoes for breakfast, something I had really been craving...I've had my share of spicy curries, dosas and idly for breakfast...(what is it with us Americans, needing special food for breakfast? Everyone else around the world eats for breakfast the same food as is eaten for lunch and dinner...)



Swimming in the warm waters, strolling along the beach, chatting with the locals, shopping in the little shops...this is how I've been filling my days. I've become quite well known by the locals here, and many of the shop owners call out my name each time I walk past. Such charming, beautiful people! I've befriended a few of the beggars, and have listened to their heart-wrenching stories...one man was struck by polio when just a boy of eight, which left his legs useless. His family and home was destroyed

by the tsunami, and he has other health issues...the Indian government does not provide for such people, so he is up to his own devices...his story is one of countless to be found throughout India....everywhere I go I have seen people who are handicapped or injured or suffering from ailments that would be treatable in America....

One of the highlights of my time here was to go on a "trip within a trip," and take the boat up the backwaters and visit the ashram of Amma, the "hugging saint mother." What an experience this was! I have to admit I was a bit nervous to venture out on my own, but since none of my friends were able to join me, I decided to go for it. I made arrangements for an auto-rickshaw to pick me up about 7:45 am and take me to the train station in Varkala. While there, I met some college students who were commuting to a nearby university, and they took me under their wing. I sat with them on the train and we stumbled through the language barrier and laughed and talked the entire one hour train ride, with them sort of mesmerized by my white foreignness and me delighted by their charming Indian youth.

During the train ride, an event happened that will undoubtedly stay with me forever...I was sitting next to the window, looking out, as we pulled into a train station. A strange movement caught my eye, and I noticed, walking along the train track, a man - walking along the ground on his hands, looking very much like a spider. His legs were completely useless and just sort of dangled as he moved forward. Oh, how heart wrenching!! He looked up, and immediately noticed me - (apparently, I stand out a bit in this land of dark-skinned, dark-haired people ☺). His eyes caught mine, he stopped "walking", and we looked searchingly into each other's eyes until the train moved again. I kept thinking about the wheelchair that we have at home, which we ended up with after my mother in law passed recently, and which my kids *use as a toy*. A toy!! It just seemed so inequitable...my heart went out to this man with fervor...I channeled every bit of love my heart could muster to him, and I believe he felt it and was grateful....

After the hour ride, we arrived in Kollam. The train had been late, and I was concerned about missing my boat, so one of the young college fellows whisked me through the crowds to an auto-rickshaw out front, which then drove me to the boat ferry. I purchased my ticket, and hopped on board. This was not a fancy tourist boat; this was a boat for local transportation, which is just the experience I had hoped for. Moments after arriving, we took off (I made the boat just in time, the only one that day), and we made our way slowly through the "backwaters" which parallel the coast.

There is only a narrow strip of land between the backwaters and the ocean, and it is densely covered in coconut trees, banana trees, and the loveliness of the tropical jungle here. As we meandered up the river, I could see huts dotting the shoreline...simple, crude, many of them falling apart...and people immersed in their daily lives; fishing, washing laundry in the river, pulling water up out of the well, kids walking to school, people sitting in front of their huts talking....simple lives lived amongst the beauty of this land. We headed up river for about 3 hours, then stopped for lunch at a government-run rest station. We got off the boat, went inside, and they had spread banana leaves upon tables, and on each leaf was 3 or 4 chutneys. Servers came by and offered rice, dahl and vegetables, and voila - a delicious lunch. No silverware, no need! Fingers do just fine.

Then, back to the boat and on we continued...about ½ hour later, arising high out of the jungle, I noticed several tall pinkish-colored buildings. They looked so out of place, I found it to be quite surprising....our boat slowly headed towards it, and I started to realize...hmmmm...this must be the ashram, so much bigger than I would ever have expected!! Big perhaps, but no boat dock – so as we pulled close to shore, a man grabbed hold of a palm frond from an overhanging palm tree, pulled the boat as close to shore as possible, and indicated for me to leap – which I did! How fun.



OK, so there I was – now what? The boat took off, and I had no idea where to go or what to expect. A few people were milling here and there, but no one seemed to speak English...I found a promising little desk that had a sign over it reading “Enquiry” – it was empty, so I waited there for awhile, but no one appeared for me to “enquire” of, so I moseyed on. A large, beautiful temple rose out of the center of the complex of buildings, and I headed towards it...I found a sign that said “Accommodations”, and that also seemed encouraging...I wandered up steps along the inside of the temple, following the directions that someone gave me, and found the “Accommodations” desk...but it was closed. A sign said it would open shortly, so I sat down and waited...eventually a young British man appeared, opened up, and assigned me a room...to be shared with a roommate.



Amma (the “Hugging Mother”) was not at the ashram, so things were rather quiet, apparently, although I soon learned that there was actually quite a bustle of people about. However, many of the services were only open for very limited hours, so I spent the next few hours getting my needs sorted out...after checking in, I found my room; on the 13th floor of one of the buildings! Who would have guessed, such a large building?! There was a lovely view from the room – the ashram is right in the middle of the strip of land, with the river on one side and the Arabian Sea on the other, a short 3 minute stroll from shore to shore...so beautiful!! I entered my room, and found it full of white laundry, fluttering in a breeze, strung across the room...apparently laundry day for my roommate, and as it turns out, everyone wears

white in the temple (except for the swamis, who wear either yellow or orange, and *me* – who wore the lovely green chiradhar that Jim brought me from India, since I had no idea what the “dress code” was!). Once again, I stood out....at any rate, I needed to get my bedding and pillow, which were available at a room on the bottom floor, and which was only open for one hour, and so I needed to wait...there was a computer available, and I felt a need to let my

wonderful loved ones know that I was safe and sound, and this also was closed and I had to wait.. the computers were from the Jurassic era, and barely worked...all part of the fun.

Finally, I was settled, and wandered around checking out the place. There was a tour for newcomers at 5:15, which I eagerly took, and was quite glad I did so...

Known globally as India's "hugging saint mother", Amma (her full name is "Amritanandamayi", which literally means "Mother of Absolute Bliss"), was born to a low caste Hindu family right on this very spot, which is actually a poor fishing village in Parayakadavu, Kollam. Amma's family was quite poor, and she achieved enlightenment and began hugging devotees at an early age. At first, her father gave her their cow shed for her to use to receive devotees, and the cow shed is still there, a very sacred place where puja is performed.

Amma is said to have hugged at least 21 million people over the past three decades. In the 1980s, she founded the ashram to receive followers and offer them her healing hugs. There have been times when she has hugged over 20,000 devotees in a row over 20 hours at a stretch. Devotees find it blissful and soul-soothing, and Amma says it is her "karma to give hugs in order to console those who are sad."

She is an active, living saint, which is rare, and is very involved in charitable projects all over the world, including helping those affected by the tsunami in 2004 (which, by the way, stuck the ashram. Interestingly, the tsunami struck on a Sunday, which is the busiest day at the ashram. On Sundays, Amma always offers darshan (blessings) at the huge outdoor temple since the smaller indoor temple is not large enough. However, on the day of the tsunami, she instructed everyone that she wished to offer darshan in the indoor temple, which everyone found surprising. When the tsunami hit, the outdoor temple was engulfed in water, and many would have died. However, the indoor temple was largely unaffected and there were no deaths).

After the tour, the evening session of chanting began, with the women in the indoor temple and the men in the outdoor temple...so I followed the women inside, settled myself on the floor, and became transfixed by the lovely chanting, which continued for 1-1/2 hours. The chants were either in Hindi or Malayam, I wasn't sure, all I knew is that I couldn't understand it, so I just took in the scene, and let it fill my soul...it was beautiful, and left me feeling uplifted, light as air...at the front of the temple was a devi (goddess), it was not clear which one, but after the chanting was completed (1-1/2 hours later), the lights were turned off in the temple, and a puja was performed, honoring the devi, with ringing of a loud bell, and smudging of the deity with smoke and fire...

Afterward, it was time for dinner...everyone lined up in the outdoor temple, where food is served, free of charge, to anyone who shows up. I noticed most everyone was carrying a metal plate with them to receive their food, and I certainly did not have a plate, so I sort of observed what to do in this case...I noticed people heading to a large storage container, in which were hundreds of metal plates, most of them wet...I observed that people would remove a plate, then head to the outdoor sink, and rinse it off..they dipped their hand into a bucket on the edge of the sink containing grey stuff, and used this to scrub the plate (I

learned later this was soap flakes mixed with ash – the ash works great for scrubbing). I sort of cheated – I had some Purell in my purse, so I dowsed my plate with this and scrubbed it extra well...I wasn't sure about the history of that plate, ya' know?? Huge pots of rice, vegetables and dahl were waiting for us, and we lined up and received a large scoop of each onto the plates...most people ate with their hands, so I proceeded to do this, as I've gotten quite good at it by now...afterwards, people dumped whatever food was left in the plate into a trash can (to be used as compost), rinsed the plate quickly, then threw it back in the large container...I was quite glad I had done such a thorough scrubbing job on my plate!

It started raining during dinner, and as I walked back to my room, I dodged rain puddles and got fairly drenched...back in my room, I took a quick (cold, of course) shower, peeled off my chiradara, and settled into sleep...

I slept well until I heard a loud bell ringing outside...I had no idea what time it was, but assumed it was intended to wake us for the 5:00 am chanting, so I arose and readied myself...then learned the bell rang at 4:00 am...ah well...I crawled back into bed for awhile, and listened to the sounds of the ashram, then got up and headed to the temple early...this time, I sat near the back so that I could take in the view of the entire temple, filled with the devotees all in white, hundreds of them (and this is when the ashram is *empty*)...most of the women had stacks of books with them, books of chants...after each chant, which lasted 10 or 15 minutes, a woman called out which book and page number the next chant is to be found on, and the chanting resumed... I found the time to pass quickly, as I closed my eyes, and once again allowed myself to become uplifted by it...

After chanting, I decided to walk around before breakfast (breakfast wasn't served until 9:00 am), so I grabbed my camera (pictures aren't allowed in the ashram) and walked over a bridge (one that Amma built after the tsunami to help those who need to flee) to a small, sparse village on the other side...there was a path along the river, which I walked along in the misty morning air...and was transported into another era... Sort of a time warp for me, I found myself in a time without a number attached, where people live as they have for centuries – simple huts, made from whatever materials they could find, pieced together to keep out the rain...fires in the front yard, along with a water well...a life that is lived as much inside as outside, with laundry, cooking, repairing, done outside, sitting on the steps or ground... Everyone stopped to stare at me, although I was trying hard to be discreet! (The ashram discourages people from mingling with the locals, since they still live the traditional way and the ashram does not wish for us to interfere with their fabric of life...)...but it was hard to resist just *walking*, so I did so...I tried to tiptoe along, unnoticed...which I was fairly successful at, at least until a young school girl came out of her hut, dressed for school, saw me, ran up and said "pen?" - "pen?". Eek, what could I do? I smiled and said, "do you want a pen?," and she just kept smiling, so I reached into my purse, found a purple pen, and presented it to her...she beamed from ear to ear...then her little sister ran outside, and the girl showed it to the sister, who got very



excited, then the grandmother appeared, and they saw I had a camera, and wanted a picture...so I obliged, then of course they wanted to see the pictures, as everyone here does, so I showed them, and they squealed with delight, and the girl rushed off to school, happy as can be, and I felt a bit guilty about all this, and quickly headed back to the ashram...

When I got back, it was time for breakfast...I learned that there was a small counter where one can order (and pay for) a variety of foods, and decided to check this out, largely in hope of a cleaner plate situation (sorry, but true)...to my relief, they used fresh, clean plates (well, so I assumed, anyway)...so I ordered a dish with egg and bread, for about 30 cents...I walked over to a table, sat down, and a woman rang a bell and began saying a prayer...I closed my eyes for the prayer, and when I opened them, I saw a large crow flying off with my food!

Ah well...I ordered another, along with a nice hot cup of chai...a fellow sat down at my table, who had been living at the ashram for 4 months (I later learned that some people live there for *years* - one person I met had lived there for 7 years!). His name was Ian, and he and a group of friends lived at a commune in Wales...it was an interesting conversation about commune life...He was at the ashram to "burn off layers of his ego", and said it was important for him to do this, but was not easy, as ashram life is austere, and not a comfortable existence...

After breakfast, I wandered some more, this time to the ashram-approved beach (☺), where I sat on the shore and meditated for awhile...on the way, I passed by the gate of a large enclosure...looking inside, I saw two large elephants! Temple elephants! They do exist! Quite thrilling...one of them was lying on the ground, and two men were busily at work giving him a bath...they were soaking him with a hose, then using rocks (yep, just plain garden-variety rocks) to scrub it with...they scrubbed and scrubbed, and the elephant just lazed there, quite happy about the attention. The men indicated that it was OK for me to come close, so I did - in fact, I petted the elephant, and hung with it for a long time...it's trunk seemed quite happy with my presence, as the trunk explored me, breathed on me, tickled my skin...the men kept looking at me, and finally started to say something, which I couldn't understand, so they repeated it several times, until I could finally make out the word "money", so OK, it's worth 50 rupees to commune with an elephant...The other elephant stood nearby, picking up palm fronds with its trunk and swishing them along its back...just a wonderful domestic scene of elephants passing time!

Afterwards, it was time for lunch, and again I ordered from the little "café" (I couldn't get the dishwashing practices out of my mind...)...and then, it was time to go...I had arranged for a taxi to pick me up, and take me back to Varkala - it just seemed like the best option for me, traveling alone (plus the boat would not have arrived until 6:00 pm, which would have made it really late when I got back to Varkala). It was a two hour taxi ride back to Varkala, and the total charge was about \$23...(wouldn't gas alone cost nearly that much??)...I must say that as much as I enjoyed my little excursion, I was quite happy to return to my little bamboo hut by the sea...

By now, my time was running short before returning home, and I spent the next day wandering around and talking to locals, for the most part...a bit more shopping, eating, getting to know people, talking to the beggars who were always there...I found their lives so interesting, and wanted to absorb everything I could about them, to help me better understand. I swam for hours in the luscious warm waters of the Arabian Sea (just love saying that ☺), although this is the one and only time I felt any sort of police presence (outside of the airport)...there were men stationed on the shore, who would blow a whistle if you ventured into areas where they did not want you to swim...I'm pretty sure it was because there tended to be a very strong undercurrent, and you could easily get swept away...so, as grudging as I felt about this at first, once I started experiencing the strong current, I felt grateful...and just happily swam where they wanted me to, and where I knew I was being watched...

I also got my haircut, in a little hut on the bluffs..a lovely young woman, who had a brand new baby swinging from a scarf, tied to a bamboo pole while she cut...then she offered to die my eyelashes, something I never do, but said what the heck, and had them dyed brown...I'm not sure it really did anything, but it made her happy, and the cut and dye job cost all of about \$6.00...

As I walked along the bluffs on that last day, I stopped to speak with Mohammed, who works at the tiny little "shop," which is really more of a hut, just a few steps from my bamboo hut. It's where I buy my drinking water and toilet paper. At any rate, he told me what a difficult time his family is having financially, and that he works every day, with no days off, to help...he was young, about 25 years old. I mentioned to him about the economic crisis America is facing right now, and he looked at me as if I had lost my mind...He said "but America is a rich country!", and I thought about the living conditions that I had experienced in India, and suddenly I felt silly...like a spoiled rich kid, complaining that she hadn't gotten her allowance that week...we do live in a land of such opulence, such abundance, such comfort, such opportunity! And far too much waste...

We take so much for granted in America...even things as simple as sleeping...it's very common here to just go to sleep on the floor; a lot of people don't have beds, they simply spread a thin mat on the floor, lay down, toss a thin piece of fabric over them, and go to sleep - hard floor, and all. Shopkeepers often have no other home, and sleep on the floor of their shop, doing their cooking in the back. Nikka shares a home with a family across the street from Rasa Ayurveda, and this is a family of comparative opulence here, yet the three children in the family have no bedroom of their own, or even a bed...at bedtime, they simply lay down on the floor in the living room and go to sleep, still in the clothes they are wearing!

So many lessons, so much to absorb, so many experiences... I know that when people ask me, "so how was India?," I will be at a loss for words... Where do I start? How do I sum it up? What does this all mean? I know that in my heart and mind, much is happening, a whole process is going on inside of me, sort of like a giant processing factory, with workers buzzing around, doing important jobs, and from a distance it's apparent that there's a lot of activity, and it's undoubtedly quite important, but beyond the ability of an idle observer to fully grasp...I feel like an observer of this amazing process, and inside of me is this

factory...a whole factory busily processing, categorizing, grasping, pondering, and most importantly, relishing...for what a delicious gift this is! Fortunately, I have the rest of my life to complete (and continue) the process. One thing that is quite clear; through it all, I feel gratitude...a deep, pervasive gratitude that fills and nourishes my soul...and with this, a smile, resting happily upon my grateful lips...

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