

# Travels in India

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I'm only 20 years old and my eyes are now open. I say to myself "My family influences every decision I make" – including the one where I decided to board a plane to India to spend a month living in a rural village. It's New Year's Eve and I am waiting, all alone at Sydney Airport, for my flight to Bangalore. Boarding pass clutched in hand, I'm already sweating at the huge shock that must await me.

After an exhausting 42-hour transit I was greeted by the most magnificent array of colours, sounds and scents, an immediate sensory overload. With its raging population of 1.3 billion and rich culture, India has always been a place I have dreamed of visiting. For years I have wanted to meet its incredible people, breathe its aromas, taste its spices and be blinded by its magnificent colours – but as soon as I was there I froze in shock and panic, which at that moment seemed ridiculous.

It was late last year when I applied to do a month-long internship with 40K Globe, a social enterprise organisation that encourages university students to drive sustainable change in rural India. Being a media student, I was placed in the Plus Media Project, which involves scripting, filming and editing culturally relevant educational videos for teaching children English in rural villages near Bangalore. These videos are to be distributed on learning tablets called Plus Pods in the after-school centres 40K Globe has set up.

My home for the month was Meenakunte, a village an hour out of Bangalore. Day to day, we wandered through the colourful streets, forming relationships with the village community and working with them to come up with culturally relevant and engaging video ideas.

Initially I was sceptical about the way 40K Globe emphasised the importance of teaching English in India. Why should I just barge into this country and attempt to impose my language on its people? I never understood until I experienced first-hand the shocking contrast between India's rich and poor. Every billboard or commercial aimed at those with a substantial income is in English. To the people living in Meenakunte, an advertisement for an Audi is no more than jumbled letters.

It soon became obvious that English is the leading symbol of wealth in India. Knowing the language opens up many more job opportunities. And as much as this makes me grit my teeth in anger, it also motivated me. My first experience visiting a Plus Pod in a neighbouring village was overwhelming. I had to step outside to stop myself from breaking down in front of a room full of children at seeing how much impact the Plus Pods, developed by young individuals like me, had on the children.

My travelling companions are also only 20. Travelling as three females after we finished our placement was the most shocking and eye-opening experience. We found comfort among other women when we were ignored and barged into by men, when their prejudice made us feel small and frail. Women in India have impacted me for the rest of my life. I have never seen such strength in human eyes as I did in the mothers and young women of India. Experiencing first hand a glimpse of the gender injustices so deeply ingrained in so much of their culture was appalling. India opened up my eyes to so many of the world's inequalities, it dragged me out of my bubble, it made me value real human connection. It also made me understand the complexity of the world and



PHOTO: The author with a group of children in Meenakunte, India.

human will power. It made me think of the values my parents had raised me with, the reason I boarded that plane to Bangalore in the first place.

My parents were also only 20 when they fled the war in the former Yugoslavia and moved to Germany, where I was born. They lived on a temporary protection visa until eventually they found protection and a home in Sydney.

Being connected through a lifeblood of human injustice and having been a refugee myself has inspired me to see the world, meet people, experience different cultures and – most of all – listen to peoples' stories similar and different to my own.

Nothing did this more than India, and the people who I had the privilege of meeting, in particular one girl. She was 20, too. Her family invited us in for chai tea one day, although the only way we could communicate was through stares, smiles and gestures. I'll never forget her hand grabbing mine as I began to walk back to our home and she said to me in broken English, 'please I want to study in Australia'. I'll never forget her sister's roaring laughter, as if it was the funniest joke she had ever heard. Her stare made my

heart throb and I prayed that the efforts made by myself and others, through 40K Global, would one day make her dream come true.

My month in India made me realise so much about the world and myself. It made me aware of the extent of human injustice in our world. But, although they hardly have much in the material sense, these people surprised me on a daily basis with their kindness and gratitude. After returning my heart ached at the thought of leaving behind all those incredible people I had met who have changed me forever, especially the women.

During my two months in India the colourful streets of Meenakunte became my home, the local villagers my family. The children left their fingerprints in my heart forever and the goodbye was one of the hardest moments I had ever had to face.

India is hard, incredibly challenging most of the time. Every minute is sensory overload and absolutely nothing was familiar compared with my home back in Australia – except the startling resemblance between the Indian peoples' courage and that of my own parents. R