



Herald Hindustan



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United states

Unsure of what to expect, Alice Markham-Cantor (United states) writes that her initial misgivings about not being able to adjust to Madurai's small-town conservatism was offset by the kindness extended to her by the local people

My first day in Madurai, I wasn't sure what to expect. My preconception of India was a mental car-crash of spicy food, brightly-colored saris, and oppressive heat. This mixed together with Bollywood films and constant warnings from friends--"don't trust anyone with your bags" and "don't get on any buses"-until the only thing I was sure of was that I'd experience some industrial-strength culture shocks.

To be fair, my culture shock was slightly lessened by the week I spent in Kathmandu just prior to flying into Madurai. Both cities lack traffic laws or lights, inviting the streets to transform from places of transportation to full-fledged battlefields. In both you can hear the undulating music of Indian pop songs emanating from tiny taxis or auto-rickshaws, and in both I was constantly stared at and charged extra money.

Madurai has its own charm. Walking into the city streets, the heat attaches to you with the persuasion of a thrown brick. Brilliantly-colored clothes and flowers appear like gorgeous splashes of paint on a dusty brown canvas. Dogs and cows roam free in front of modern clothing stores, flinging flies into the air with each swish of a tail. The calls of insects and car horns mix with the cawing of crows and the rumbling of the railway, inviting you to



imagine the city as a place where the past and present meet, each fighting for ground.

I wasn't sure how well I would adjust to the hold past traditions have on Madurai; buses segregate women and men, and it is totally not appropriate for women to do many of the things that men can, such as wear short pants and walk after dark. If I am to be honest, I don't think I will ever entirely adjust. However, while the treatment of women cannot be ignored, neither can the kindness of every local I met.

My second morning in Madurai, I was running across the street, trying to avoid being hit by motorbikes and auto rickshaws, and my cell phone fell out of my pocket. A man picked it up and chased after me down the street

to return it with a smile and a few heavily accented words of English. This was just my first taste of the warm welcome Madurai had to offer, and I began to realize that the culture shock would be eased by the factor I had not included in my expectations: the people themselves. ☒



From Fuzziness to Curiosity

Story By Julie Larsen

Denmark

Despite being slightly bewildered by a city which seems constantly in motion, Julie Larsen (Denmark) seems very determined to jump right into her Madurai adventure, as her enthusiasm to attend the mid-night Christmas service on the day just after her arrival shows

At first everything felt frantic and blurry. I have always wanted to travel to India and I knew it would be colourful, different and challenging, but I think India is a country you need to experience with your own eyes to obtain an actual impression. When I arrived to Madurai, I could finally breathe a sigh of relief. I could relax after a stressful journey with several stopovers because I had reached my destination: Madurai. It was a quiet, warm and almost a silent evening when I arrived and I was greeted by a welcoming host family who all looked at me with curious eyes.

Though the quiet night does not last and I soon found out how busy the city is during the day time. The city is constantly in motion. The traffic is hectic and always moving, except when the buses or rickshaws have to pick up new travellers in the dusty surroundings. To cross the road seemed very frightening in the beginning and my first attempt to cross it on my own did result in a couple of cars using their horns, but in the end I made it safely to the other side. Though the nature of the traffic did not surprise me because it was so similar to the traffic in Nepal, however the business of the traffic does surprise me everywhere I go in Madurai.

During my second day, I was invited to attend a Christmas church service by my host family and I gladly accepted the offer. The church ceremony was so colourful with all the beautiful saris



and jasmine flowers in the women's hair. You can see the saris everywhere here in India, but that moment was special because of the number of women wearing saris – it was like a colourful ocean in motion when the women clapped their hands. As I sat there in the church, it almost felt like celebrating Christmas at home, which is a thing I did not expect me and my host family to have in common. After this event I was in a strangely uplifted mood because I felt that I had come to know a little bit of India.

I still feel that everything around me is a bit blurry and I am sure that in some moments and situations I will have that feeling even when I have been here for a longer time. But to avoid the

blurriness, I am going to jump right into becoming acquainted with India. I have only come to know a little bit of what India can offer and I am sure that there is plenty more for me to discover and to be grateful for. The saying “do not judge a book by its cover”, is exactly what I am going to do: I will open my eyes and keep discovering India until the blurriness disappears and the true beauty of India appears. ❄

Awakening to A Different World

Story By Noemie Halioua

France



Noemie Halioua (France) dwells on the myriad colours of Madurai, so different from the 'drabness' of her hometown Paris and on how the city has taught her to live according to the Gandhian way of life, in simplicity and peaceful coexistence with others

A spectrum of colours greets my first glimpse of the city of Madurai - a world apart from the tedium of the greys and the mundane activities which I have become accustomed to in my hometown, Paris. As I look upon a strange new land with vibrant colours all around me - the bright yellow of the sun and the orange of the curry - it feels as if my eyes had been blindfolded for many days and have finally been opened. At first, I felt a little out of place but after a while, I really started to feel that I don't want to leave.

Arriving in India, I began to ponder over the vast differences which it has from Paris and I am astonished at the colours, the flora and fauna and the way that animals seem to live in peaceful coexistence with human beings. No animal is harmed here. In France, stray dogs are killed because they don't have the opportunity to be adopted, unlike here. Squirrels, cats, pigs, cows and sometimes even monkeys roam around peacefully on the streets. Also, flowers, trees and bushes seem to grow wild between the houses. In India, people don't interfere with nature.

Here, humans share their territory with nature and live with her like a sister; people here don't lock her up like a slave inside four walls.

Another way of looking at the world

In the eyes of a Westerner, many of these differences seem strange and almost frightening, posing risks and dangers. Though the Indian people and nature are closely linked with flora and fauna (the animals and flowers), I also think of the diseases that the community could be exposed to by this. The differences are reflected in so many areas - in the morning, the alarm of the I-phone is replaced by the crowing of the rooster, while the bright rays of the sun make the popular UV spaces of Paris, where synthetic UV rays are used by people wishing to get a tan totally redundant here. The food is natural and not contaminated.

Remembering Gandhi's principles

Madurai has also taught me to discover and live unitedly with others. Staying in Madurai, I am repeatedly reminded of one of the fundamental principles of Gandhi's philosophy : to be content with what we have, to give importance only to our primary needs, not to be greedy for wealth, to concentrate only on the essentials. And that includes caring about other people, even if they are totally different from me.

I was happy to rediscover myself by seeing and experiencing a new culture. ☒



Dirty Day Pictures 18th December *At Velivetheeyar Govt School - Madurai*



Volunteers in action at cleaning the walls of the school

Volunteers from various projects enjoying painting



Finished view of the school by Volunteers after painting