Day one in India and I was consumed with fear and excitement all at the same time. I didn’t know what to expect. My head had been filled with varying stories that portrayed India as a wonderland of diversity in people and animals. Since I chose to stay in a home-stay with two other girls in the class before the academic program started, I was able to see firsthand what a home in India looked and felt like.

The home-stay was a block away from a shopping district but it was in Old Town Bangalore. There was little in the way of modern clothing and shops to be seen within walking distance of the home-stay, which I believe was the best way for us to begin to experience India. Within the home-stay the owners were very welcoming and made me feel like I was at home there. The lady of the house made a very traditional Indian breakfast that I became all too familiar with by the end of the trip. I knew I'd be okay after that breakfast though. The food tasted wonderful and it wasn't too spicy for me to enjoy.

The cows were the first thing I saw when I walked out the home-stay. Now that I think about it I’m sure the girls I was with and I looked pretty funny taking a picture in front of the cows since they are so common. The only cows I had known before the trip all lived on cattle ranches and were locked in fences in open fields. The cows in India walk on the sidewalk just like I did. They cross the street and are greeted by people in certain cases. They pretty much live their own lives just within close proximity to people. The dogs live similar lives, only less carefree.

Cows are sacred in India and are so protected from any harm due to legal and social conventions; however this is not the case for dogs. Dogs’ lives can be a little more dangerous because of this. They can time the traffic well enough to cross the streets, which is a big deal because even I had to be very attentive to cross safely. I remember before going to India in one of our initial group meeting the professor said, “you never have the right of way in India.” I never forgot that and I survived rush hour traffic on foot because of it.

In the U.S we spoil our dogs to the point that they lose their ability to survive without humans. The dogs in India know where and when to go to certain places for food. When they hear or smell a chicken being killed for dinner they will surround the house and wait for scraps. They eat the bones and all. This allows them to be able to survive on anything they find. Our dogs in the U.S would have serious stomach issues if they were to eat anything they found in a pile of trash. Although the dogs look pretty pathetic in the cities, the dogs in the country couldn't look happier. They come and go as they please, and since there are a lot less of them in small areas, the scraps people give
them provide a good meal. I was able to witness the extent of dogs' loyalty to humans in this stressful environment. Certain dogs would be very fearful because of the cruel things people do to them such as kicking them for no reason on the street, and yet when the dogs saw us approach them in kindness they would follow us for days on hikes or just come by repeatedly for affection. Despite being mistreated by some, they still enjoy the company of humans and stick around.

“There is a group of American undergrads coming to India that we would like you to speak to about your work.” From the way I have been told that Americans are perceived overseas, I didn't expect our resource people to be very excited about coming to speak to us. However, I felt exactly the opposite way after meeting the many researchers that I came to know while in India. They were all very kind and patient with our group. These people were excited about the plants and animals we were seeing and discussing which made me feel that much more excited. I never felt that they were annoyed or frustrated with our group because of our lack of knowledge. Instead they seemed very willing to show us as much as they could so we could find out the answers to our questions. Towards the end of the trip we had learned so much that the resource people had to work a little harder to teach us new information. By no means did we become experts but it was obvious that we had some experience with the environment in India. One thing that really impressed me was that the resource people who took us on the last hike in the forest wanted to hear our opinions after it was all over. They were curious to know how we felt about the accommodations, the food, the work, everything. This curiosity made me feel like they really did want us to enjoy our time there and not leave unhappy. The variety of food was impressive but the greatest reward at the end of the first days' hike were the potatoes and carrots cooked in oil.

I was worried that I would come home starving because much of the Indian food I ate in the US was too spicy for me to enjoy. I wasn't going to let the food in the country keep me from seeing this biodiversity hotspot, though. I decided that as long as there was rice and vegetables I would be fine. Little did I know, most of what I would be eating the next six weeks would be rice and vegetables. These vegetables were cooked in different ways every time and were the highlight of the Indian burritos I made at every meal. It's common to mix every item of food you eat with chapatti or rice. I chose to add rice and each of the vegetables then roll them into a burrito with chutney or sambar on top. This was my favorite way to eat even though it is somewhat of a shortcut when it comes to eating with your hands.

The accommodations I stayed in while in India came in a wide variety. The first place I stayed with the group included three person tents. I was very excited about this. We were able to get out of the city, which is something our entire group was looking forward to, and stay at a campground. Our tent had a pair of chipmunks or the Indian three-striped Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus palmarum*) that I met one day when I was dealing with a little dehydration. I thought I might have been hallucinating since I was having very lucid dreams that day, but then someone else saw them and I knew they were real. They visited our tent
frequently over the ten days that we stayed at Forest Trails. I became accustomed to living with nature during this time. For example, I would brush my teeth and instead of staring at my own reflection in the mirror I’d watch a gecko hanging out by the sink. Then, at night when I was trying to fall asleep, I’d watch the geckos try to catch bugs around the light. I miss the familiar sound of the geckos all around me now that I am back in the US. Our living accommodations usually came in the form of dorms. These dorms were much different from our typical college dorms because they were a lot nicer. In Mysore, we stayed in a dorm that had a beautiful courtyard and open hallways next to the courtyard. Monkeys, usually bonnet macaques, enjoyed the place as much as we did since they lived in the courtyard. This close proximity to the courtyard proved to be very interesting when one of the monkeys decided to come into my bedroom while I was writing in my journal. My roommate screamed while I sat there in pure disbelief that a three foot monkey had just walked into my room. Overall I really enjoyed the time we spent in the cities just because it allowed me to use things such as the internet, but the times we spent staying in the forest were priceless. An elephant came within ten feet of our door one night and that is something I know I’ll never forget.

Living with a group of people that I didn’t know for six weeks sounded like being put on a season of the TV show Real World. I knew that we would all be different but the variety of people I grew to love and depend on came from all walks of life. Living in community dorms where we all stayed in one big room was one of my favorite things.

Staying up late singing to each other and laughing about the day’s events or even complaining as a group was nice. I was able to see that I wasn’t alone in my frustration some days and it made coping easier.

I’ve noticed a few subtle changes in myself since returning from India. For one I try to be a lot more kind to people I do not know. The way our group was treated even though we were strangers has really stuck with me. I recognize that we should all try to treat our neighbors and strangers like family because it is just the right thing to do. I learned that I am capable of living on just the contents of one backpack and that make-up isn’t a necessary step to starting my day off. I realized that certain things that meant a lot to me before such as constantly worrying about my appearance are a waste of time and there are much more important things that can be done with my mornings. India made me appreciate the small things in my life. I appreciate hot water and drinking water from the faucet more than I ever did before. These are things that are so common for me that I didn’t realize how much I would miss them should I have to live without them. Overall I learned very much about another wonderful culture and country and a lot about myself in the process.