ADJUSTING TO THE INDIAN SPICE

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SAVE THE TIGERS, SAVE THE WORLD

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Most every one has seen an elephant at some point in their life. Every major zoo in the world has elephants, and if they have not seen them there not there, most folks have been to the circus to see them, at least. The thing is, however, seeing one in the wild is not the same. I remember the first time unmistakably. As our bus circled around a bend in the road and came upon a large watering hole, a chorus of gasps arose within the vehicle. As the cameras came up I recall thinking to myself, “my god, they really do exist in the wild!” Yes, it seems obvious, but when you witness creatures that have previously only appeared behind fences, something just clicks, and a new appreciation is born altogether. “This is how it’s meant to be,” you think.

If my memory serves me correctly, it was a group of three adults and one calf. As the minutes passed, our jaws agape and cameras constantly clicking, it became apparent the elephants were all too aware of our presence. Chills crawled down my spine as the lead cow stamped her feet and flicked her ears, looking directly at us. It was all too obvious the message she was trying to convey. “It’s time to go,” someone said. We, clearly, were on their turf.

I spent six weeks in Southern India. Six, in fact, of the most meaningful weeks of my entire life. There mainly to study field ecology and environmental issues, the whole experience encompassed so much more than that. Not only did I travel and bond with an amazing group of people who I’m sure will all be lifelong friends, I also plunged headfirst into a wonderfully different culture I previously knew absolutely nothing about. Some mornings I woke up to the upbeat hustle of a massively crowded city, while others I arose to mist rising from the serene jungle floor. I witnessed the work of life-changing non-government organizations and learned from some of the most brilliant and esteemed minds in the country. I took tea with people kind enough to bring those they’ve never met into their home, and walked through the villages of the Soliga, the people of the bamboo.

Don’t let me get ahead of myself, however. India isn’t all sunshine and roses. There were times I felt my limits being pushed, as well. The pollution in Bangalore was often overwhelming, as was the poverty. I’ll never forget walking down the street late at night, streets filled with packs of running dogs, and entire families sleeping, huddled together for warmth. One image that’s especially vivid is that of a boy, missing both his hands and both his feet, crawling away from us in shame. Long hikes tested endurance and were often plagued with leeches, and
nearly everyone got sick at some point, adjusting to the strong spice of the local cuisine. In hindsight these are the experiences that really helped me to grow as a person, especially the first hand revelation that a very small portion of the world is as fortunate as America.

Things often worked out much differently than you would expect them, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. When I first arrived in Bangalore, I got there without my luggage. After being charged more than twice what I should have paid for a taxi (I’m terrible at haggling), I arrived at our dorms only to find the doors had been locked for the night and no one was working the front desk. Yes, my first night in India was spent sleeping on the stoop. A few days later the airline called to notify me that my luggage had arrived. I was overjoyed, only to find out when I got back to the dorms that the delivery courier they had hired tried to extort money from the front desk, and left with my bag when they refused to pay up. Luckily our study abroad group had the support of a group called Assist America, and when they threatened to press charges, the courier returned the bag. But, like I said, sometimes things tended to work out unexpectedly for the better, as well. My return trip itinerary stated I should check in with the airline 1230 minutes in advance. That’s over 20 hours. My first thought was to check in online, but that didn’t work. Next I tried to call the airline, during business hours, mind you, but they didn’t answer. After several more failed attempts to check in online, I decided, forget it, I’ll just arrive at the airport like I would for any international flight. Never one to hop into line at the first boarding announcement, I was one of the last people to board the plane. As the flight attendant scanned my boarding pass, an alarm sounded. “Oh no,” I thought, “I was too late checking in and they gave my seat to someone else!” “Sir, you need to see my colleague,” said the attendant, ushering me around the corner as my dread grew even greater. “Ah, Mr. Barton!” said the colleague, “You’ve been complimentary upgraded to first class, I hope you enjoy your flight.” And enjoy it I did.

Situations like this became the norm for our journey. Once you learn to expect the unexpected, life just becomes a little more interesting. In order to get the full experience one must learn to go with the flow, and often this means stepping outside your normal comfort zone. Take the food, for example. Indians don’t use silverware, nor do they use the left hand to eat. The one-handed ball and scoop technique took some getting used to, but became second nature eventually. Furthermore, the nearly all vegetarian cuisine seemed at first to be unexciting and redundant. Once my palate adjusted to the spice, however, I couldn’t get enough.

India’s religious beliefs and culture have played an influential role in the evolution of its cuisine, and understanding the religion takes a leap of faith, as well. The Hindu temples were some of the most beautiful urban sites we visited. What had the biggest impact on me was, as opposed to western religion, there were no guided sermons. People express their religion on a much more personal level, going to the temple to say their prayers at any time of the day, whenever they have a moment, all on their own. At first I felt a bit uncomfortable to have the ashes rubbed on my brow, or accept a bindi mark on my forehead. Who was I to accept these signs from a religion I knew very little about? In the end, though, I decided these things were blessings, and if they would give, then I would accept. I think the locals
appreciated the open-mind, anyway, even if I never did “open my third eye.”

Speaking of an open mind, perhaps my most enjoyable moments in India came when all caution was thrown to the wind and we simply, danced. This was especially true when we were treated to a traditional Soliga performance. Men came out with drums and their voices, and circled around a roaring fire. Dressed in leaves and paint, their spirit was infectious, and before long, every member of our group had joined them around the fire. The beauty of the moment was surpassed only by the beauty of our surroundings, the forests of Southern India.

Elephants, wild dogs, cobra, primates, giant squirrels, boar, deer, lizards, and mongoose were just a fraction of what we saw on our travels through several forest preserves. No, we never saw a tiger in the wild, but we did come close. More than once we observed where a tiger had marked its territory, swiping at the ground with its massive paws and leaving a puddle of urine. Though we never saw a tiger, I’m sure a tiger saw us.

Tigers are the flagship animal of Indian forest conservation. I believe it was Dr. A.J.T. Johnsingh who said, “To save the forests of India, one must save the tigers. Tigers are the charismatic apex predators. In order for them to survive, everything below them on the food chain must survive.” Well, the lawmakers of India are trying to do exactly that. In the heavily protected Tiger Preservations, the highest level of protected forest in India, not even the indigenous Soliga are allowed to harvest forest resources. The land is, quite literally, untouched.

This is possibly the most glaringly apparent thing about India: the stark and shocking difference between the pristine forest and crowded cities. Both have their up sides and downs, but the country would not be the amazing, diverse place it is without both. India helped me realize that no matter where you go in this world, if one could be so lucky, despite all the differences of culture, race, or anything else, for that matter, that good people are good people. I consider myself fortunate to have been surrounded by so many. I will never forget India, and I certainly hope to return someday. My experience wasn’t that of a typical tourist. I never saw the Taj Mahal or the Himalayas, and I stayed in dorms or tents as opposed to hotels. I did as the Indians did as often as possible. I really, really do want to return someday, but in the meantime I know that India will flow on within me and without me.