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Rinker Center Maureen Megan ’09

Rice paddy diplomacy

As a Caucasian living in America, I’ve never contemplated what it means to be part of a minority. We study the Civil Rights movement in school, but the whole subject seems very disconnected when you’re not in the position yourself. In India, I couldn’t escape the fact that I was very different than everyone else. To Indians, my white skin came with a number of stereotypes: they instantly thought I was a) crazily rich and b) easily tricked.

Everywhere we went, we were pointed at, laughed at; numerous people asked to be in pictures with us, and probably hundreds more took our pictures without asking. While walking down the stairs at the Taj Mahal, a towheaded girl in our group felt someone leaning on her shoulders and tugging her hair from behind. Thinking it was one of us, she started laughing, and turned around playfully to see an elderly Indian woman getting her picture taken while clasping her white-blonde hair in her hand. By the end of our trip I found myself getting excited and pointing out white people when I saw them.

It was incredibly frustrating at times. As I am a self-diagnosed “indophile,” I just wanted to blend in, I wanted to belong. I didn’t want to be something foreign and exotic. I wanted to be part of the culture. But even masked in my sari and bindi, I was white, and therefore, inherently different. For the first time, I had to come to terms with that.

We left Delhi by train to meet with a Furman graduate doing environmental work in the Rajasthan city of Jaipur. Then flew to Bangalore, the Infotech capital of India to tour a multinational company whose yearly revenue exceeds $3.1 billion.

As we headed on to Mysore, a bus drivers’ strike was brewing. To avoid getting tipped over by an angry mob, we boarded our bus and snuck out of the city at 4 a.m. to our destination of Nagarhole National Park.

After Nagarhole we traveled by rail Kochi to the southern state of Kerala. Though we’d studied it in the abstract, we came to find that southern and northern India were entirely different. Kerala, a communist state, actually had the highest literacy rates in India, along with the lowest in female infanticide. Women walked the streets comfortably and poverty was a less prevalent than in Northern India.

We traveled further south into Tamil Nadu to a village whose inhabitants had never before seen white people. Expecting to plant trees with the villagers, we rolled up to the school and were all surprised to see a sign reading “Annukavar Government Primary School.”

RINKER CENTER FOR STUDY AWAY AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Steadfast supporters of Furman for more than 25 years, David and Leighton Rinker H ’04, most recently pledged $1 million for the newly named Rinker Center for Study Away and International Education, located in the renovated Trone Student Center.

Their gift establishes an endowment primarily to fund student scholarships in the Study Away program, distinguished by Furman faculty-led immersion and study across the United States and abroad. The center also supports the needs of international students enrolled at Furman, thanks to the generosity of Trustee Bob Buckman and Joyce Mollerup.

The Rinkers are founders of Furman’s Partner Scholarship Program and are members of the Benefactors Circle, a giving recognition that honors those whose cumulative gifts surpass $1 million. They have also been strong supporters of additional campaign projects, the Cofrin Center for Vocational Reflection and the Charles H. Townes Center for Science. Three of the Rinkers’ four children attended Furman, and Leighton has served multiple terms on the Furman Board of Trustees, including a term as chair. The Rinkers have supported travel study programs at numerous other colleges, including Stetson University, David’s alma mater.
Maureen discovered that travel might involve pachyderms, and that she excelled in rice planting.

School Welcomes Furman University, Green Village, U.S.A! Our teachers were given gigantic marigold garlands, and a festival was in full swing. Amid the shouting, microphone squeals, flies, camera flashes, and swirling incense, we watched schoolchildren dance.

On our way back from Cheyyar, our vans pulled to the side of a road straddled by rice paddies. We tiptoed down a narrow mud pathway between the paddies to a group of Tamil women. There they were, knee deep in muddy water, dark skin glistening in the hot India sun. Taking off my shoes and rolling up my pants, I stepped into the murky water as the women laughed. I was handed a bundle of rice plants as they watched with skeptical eyes. Because I could only say “Thank you” in Tamil, we worked silently beside one another. I got into the routine, shoving plant after plant into the sticky mud. The women chattered excitedly around me. Finally, asked Professor Suresh Muthukrishnan, Ph.D. (Earth and Environmental Sciences), what they were saying. He told me that they were surprised a white girl had rice planting talent. How absurd! I won the award for the best rice planter that day. I was overjoyed! Throughout the entire trip I’d attempted to blend in, but always felt slightly disconnected. Suddenly, standing in the warm water of an Indian rice paddy, so far from home, I fit in.

—MAUREEN MEGAN '09

45
years Study Away programs have been offered

49
percentage of students participating in Study Away programs annually

37
number of Study Away programs offered in 2013-2014 academic year

$1.5 million
gifts made to support Study Away programs