

Get on the bus, comrade

Alappuzha, India - February 17, 2008

Naresh:

When we went to bed last night it looked like there was going to be a transportation strike this morning, from 6AM to 6PM, and we would not be able to get to our second home stay. The strike was being called because the Communist party in Kerala is strong here, but not strong overall, and is unhappy that the federal government raised the price of fuel by 1 rupee per liter for gas and 2 rupees for diesel (or is it the other way around?) I don't have real numbers with me, but I'm guessing that comes to something like a nickel or dime per gallon, which doesn't seem like a lot to me as an American, but fuel is so heavily subsidized by the government here that that's something like a 3.5% increase in fuels prices (again, I'm guessing at some of the conversions) in a country where not everyone has all that much money to begin with. (BTW, I read this morning that an average Indian consumes 1 gallon of oil a day, all things considered, while the average American consumes 26 gallons, but I only say that to show how well-read I am).

If they'd asked me, I'd say it's totally sensible in these times of humongous crude-oil price increases that the price of fuel go up a little bit, lest the Indian government be as bankrupt as our own, but they didn't ask me. They didn't ask the Communist party either, and that's why the Communist party is mad and that's why they've called a transportation strike. From my limited sampling of locals so far, no one is happy about the strike but neither does anyone want to break the strike because 1) anyone driving themselves and/or others during this time has a chance of injury from stones thrown or left in the road, and 2) the strike is an excuse to stay home from school and work and pretty much have an extra holiday. For those of us not at home, the strike and threat of strikes is annoying.

Tapas had warned us to leave a few extra days available at the end of our trip, to get to Hyderabad for the final flight home. The extra days were a buffer in case a strike happened, which apparently is not uncommon, especially here in Kerala. Thanks for the warning, Tapas, you were right.

While waiting for more news on the situation, I took an early morning walk down a smaller canal than I'd seen on previous days. On an early Sunday, this is what I saw:



a family's
one-canoe garage

rows of houses on each side of the backwater canal, many with canoes, all with steps nearby leading to the water, many of those steps being used for body- dish- or clothes-washing, folks inside watching TV (news,

religious shows, or cartoony shows) a woman walking her dog, a few families dressed in their Sunday finest walking to (I assume) to their Christian church services. My favorite moment was passing a man who was all the way up to his neck in bathing; when I said hello he bobbed his head at me (which is the customary way to respond to any question or statement, no matter what the answer, as far as I can tell) which was particularly humorous to me because all I saw was a head bobbing in the water. Culturally insensitive, perhaps, but very funny. I didn't take many pictures during this walk because it felt weird to; it felt like I was nearly inside the people's houses during their private morning time, and I don't think I'd want people taking pictures of me as I went through my morning routine.



Back at Pooppallys for breakfast (delicious in its variety and quality, and in its quantity of toast) it looked like the strike was definitely on and so we started making arrangements to squeeze into Pooppallys for the night. Once that was all set we saw a ferry going down the canal. Then we went to see the bridge and saw that buses were running. So apparently strike had been called off.



It was close to lunchtime by the time we knew we would be leaving, so we stayed for one last Pooppally meal. Pooppallys happens to be my favorite food so far, for its wide wide variety of dishes, and for how unrecognizable many of them are to me, and for how often they contain fresh items directly from the Pooppally garden.

It was hard leaving Pooppallys, and losing all chance to keep saying "poop" all day, but we said our goodbyes to all of our new pals and left. I feel good that I left one thing behind in the toilet for the next guest: Using one of Amy's hair bands I was able to fix the toilet flushing mechanism so it would stop getting out of whack into a continuous leak of nonflushiness. That's my karma point for the day, if one can get karma points when staying with Christians.



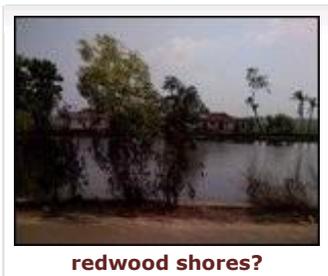
After lunch we began the many-segmented bus journey to our next homestay. We ended up taking 5 different buses to get there. Amy is an amazingly great planner, and she had figured out exactly what stations to go to, and overall it worked out great. (Amy: Joseph, the kind grandfather/owner/giver of food/manager at Pooppallys, had told me which places to change buses) There were only minor difficulties because the buses were labeled all in Malayalam (the language of Kerala, i.e., no English), and our pronunciation of every Malayalam-named city made no sense at all to the native Malayalam speakers. It's common for me to have this problem in any language, but it's unusual for Amy to

have this problem. Malayalam is really in odd language for us—many of the sounds are as difficult for us to make or even hear as it is for most Indians to say or hear the “V” in “Vegetarian” or the “E” in “Meal” (“Would you like the wedge or the non-wedge mail?”) So many times throughout the day we worked on some Malayalam phrases, first at Pooppallys, then at a bus stop, then at our final home stay. Each time the people said we had learned it wrong and tried correcting us to no avail.

Vinod. Please don't read the rest of this paragraph.

OK Bye. The main reason we want to learn Malayalam is to impress Vinod, who is from Kerala, when we get back. We wanted to meet him and say in Malayalam something like “Yo, Vinod, what is that thing in your teeth?” and watch him freak out, but we're having incredible trouble with anything as simple as “How are you?” and “I'm fine,” so we may never get to surprise Vinod. BTW, I only remember that Vinod's native language is Malayalam because he told me that it's the only language that is a palindrome. BTW2: Vinod's name is also a palindrome, but only when spelled “Vinodoniv”

Anyway, back to the bus rides. On our first leg we drove by more of the backwater canals and I realized one



thing: This part of Kerala is not “The Venice of India” as many of the books claim (while others claim that Udaipur



is “The Venice of India”). As is clear in the pictures, this area is “The Redwood Shores of India.”

Anyway, back to the bus rides. The buses here work great. They go everywhere we need to go, they're cheap, and they're extremely frequent. I love it. The buses work something like this: Each bus is run by a four-man crew (and sometimes their buddies or children who are just along for the ride). There is the driver, whose job it is to go as quickly as possible, passing cars and rickshaws and other buses with as narrow a margin as possible and as much honking as possible. Next there is a guy near the front who I'll call the bellman because he mans the bell. Using bell signals he tells the driver what's going on, such as one bell meaning “stop soon”, and two bells meaning “our new passenger has had one foot on the bus for a microsecond, why aren't you moving already?” There are other signals when backing up, and more complex ones that I don't understand. The bellman is necessary because the driver cannot see anything behind them either because there's so many people on board, but also because the side mirrors have been removed because they would interfere with the all the passing-with-one-inch-to-spare that goes on.



Next is the conductor who mans the back door (which is the enter/exit

door) who opens and closes the door, and pounds his own set of signals on the top of the bus so the bellman can then translate those signals to bell rings for the driver. Finally there is the ticket man (sometimes the same as the conductor in less-crowded buses) who goes up and down the bus, asks where you are going, then quietly says something that sound like “twelve” or “twenty-three” or “fifty-two” or “ghee-toast” or you don’t know what he’s really saying so you say “huh?” and he says it again and you give him twenty rupees, because you have no idea what he’s really asking for, and he either gives you back some change, or keeps the twenty, or asks for more money, then he gives you a little piece of paper and moves on. All in all a very efficient system that keeps people moving along quickly. Again, I say I like it.

While bussing through Kerala we saw an impressive number of posters and flags and stands for the Communist Party, called the CPIM (which I keep reading as CP/M and briefly but wrongly think how backward India is to be using such an old and defunct computer operating system, and then I realize that it’s really for Communist Party, which is an even older and more-defunct social operating system). I haven’t met anyone yet who favors the party, the best I’ve heard is that there not a lot more corrupt than they other parties, but they seem strong in signs. I can understand a desire to believe in communist principles, have a party, sure. And I can understand the popularity of shirts with Che Guevera’s picture, as he was handsome and died young enough to have not caused to much real harm. Picture of Marx, I can understand, and maybe even Lenin. But Stalin? They put pictures of Stalin on some of those posters? Amazing.

The bus got us to the lovely mountainy town of Eratupetta and we called the homestay owner, Manoj,



hi, amy, welcome to moonaluvu

to give us directions for a rickshaw or pick us up and drive us to his house (which is what he did) through a few kilometers of beautiful mountain road. The home stay is a beautiful house, much of which is the original dark wood house (in which we have our

room), and a nice house built around it in which the rest of the family stays. They only opened this up as a home stay last year, and so no one knows about it yet and we are the first Americans ever here, and the first guests of 2008. Quite an honor. The family (parents, two kids, 3 and 8, two grandparents, and an aunt we haven’t seen yet) wanted us to rest first, but I was feeling pent up and ready to explore and so wanted to go outside. They showed us many of their plants (rubber trees, nutmeg, vanilla, bananas, some tiny appley thing, tiny cucumber thing, and lots more)



our 150-year old bedroom

quickly and we hope to get a longer tour tomorrow.

That is, if we stay here tomorrow. It turns out that the Commies (you thought I was done talking about commies, didn't you) didn't cancel the strike but only postponed it until Tuesday so they can have more time to organize. But Tuesday is the day we expected to travel a long way to get to Cochin airport to get our scheduled flight out of Kerala. Now it won't happen as planned, so in the morning we may find out we have to leave a day earlier or later. Thanks a lot, commies!



Instead of worrying about that, I got a chance to show Manoj and his son some of our pictures from the camel ride, and from home. I think they liked seeing our families and parts of America. I know I liked showing them pictures of cornfields from our drive back from Kansas; I delight in saying "In America you can drive for hundreds of miles and see nothing but this corn; so much they build a palace out of it."

Dinner with the family was great (we ate and they watched). They put out silverware but Amy taunted me until I put down the silverware and ate everything (but the soup and desert) with my hands, as is the custom. I'm learning, slowly. During and after dinner we tried to learn more Malayalam language, and talked politics (mostly US elections lessons about parties and the electoral college, but also fears of what will happen tomorrow in Pakistan).

Since I'd gone that far native I asked Manoj if tomorrow he'd teach me to dress like they do. I want to learn how to wear what the men wear instead of pants: It seems like a sheet they wrap around themselves in different ways depending on the weather and activity. I forget what they call it, but I call it a "Man Sheet."

I look forward to tomorrow.

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