

Moonilavu day over Papachan's

Pala, Kerala, India - February 18, 2008

Naresh:

I woke up this morning. Took care of my usual morning business. Felt real good. Took a look at the picture Amy had taken on my iPhone in the middle of the night. Felt suddenly less well. Eeeeyuckio. (Amy, if you're reading this, I dare you to look at the photograph I left on your camera's memory card. Are you still getting that good-morning minty-fresh feeling from your toothbrush?)

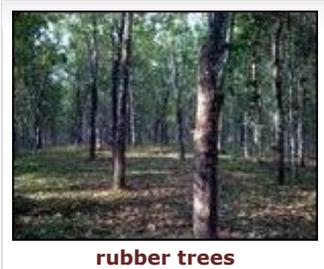


Letting Amy sleep I took off on a morning walk. The eight-year-old daughter, Sona, was just leaving for school at that time so I walked with her and her father and little brother, Manoj and Sean, up the driveway to where the bus would pick her up. The three of us continued our walk down the lane. We passed a neighbor, who happened to have the expert coconut-tree climber there, who showed us how he could very quickly climb a tree very high and cut down coconuts and leaves (or is that cut down, coconuts, & leaves?). I immediately added "climb coconut tree" to my mental list of things I must do before leaving Kerala.



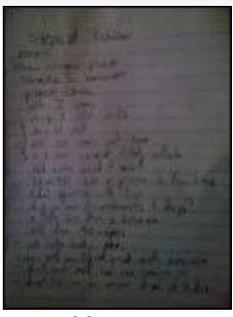
Next we came to a neighbor who was doing his early-morning rubber-tree milking, but we didn't stay long because

Manoj told me he had a lot more rubber activities planned for the rest of the day.



Breakfast was another feast of steamed banana, toast, coffee, garbanzo curry?, and half-circles of steamed rice stuff. Simi, the wife, showed us how she had steamed it in the half coconut shell with the steam from the top of a pressure cooker. We ate breakfast completely with our hands, as is our new way. (Look, ma, no silverware.)

It was not clear if there would be a strike (aka, holiday) tomorrow, and whether there would not be a safe way to travel to the airport for our scheduled flight, we got on our hosts' internet connection for a while to change our tickets. If we're reading our printout correctly, we are now leaving for Hyderabad on Wednesday instead of Tuesday, and hopefully charged 2000 rupees (\$50) extra fee for the trouble of changing the date and not charged for buying an additional set of tickets. The strike was indeed scheduled, along with the possibility of rock piled in road (as roadblocks) and rocks thrown at cars that dared violate the strike.



rubber steps

Before lunch we took a short drive to visit one of Manoj's cousins, who was prepared to show us the steps of rubber harvesting. We made a big list of all the steps so we wouldn't



dripping for an hour

forget, but the short version is

this: strip a small line of bark off, halfway round the tree, let it drip into a coconut shell for an hour, collect this



collect rubber milk

milk from many trees, mix in pan with a

little acid, after it is a little firm (and fun to touch) spread the rubber a few times between a

roller press, which squeezes out some

liquid and after a few times through makes it thinner and wider (much like

pizza dough), and

finally put it through a

final press that makes it thinner (but

not as thin as thin-crust pizza) and puts

lines on it. This is then hung in the sun

for a few days (or smoked if it's not

sunny), and finally this rubber "mat,"

which weighs a little less than a

kilogram, is sold for 90 rupees.

At this cousin's home we met the family, saw a few more

plants (including tapioca, which we would have for dinner). They gave us

some taffy candies, and we gave them

some banana chips. (our friend, Kelly,

had given us some farewell banana

chips for our bus ride (s)

On the way back to Pappachan's house we passed the

smokehouse where the rubber pieces can be smoked,

instead of sun-dried, if it is rainy (or if you want that

special hickory tangy taste in your galoshes). We viewed

the smoke house, said our Namascallum's to the man

there, and left with two canisters of some kind of fuel.

Manoj said "that was another cousin."

We took the long way home from there, so we'd have a

chance to see more of Moonilavu. While we drove Amy

and I tried again and again to say "Moonilavu" correctly,

but every time we said what we thought was right,

somebody would correct us. "Moonilavu" is a cross

between "Moon-ih-LOW" and "Moon-ih-LA-VU" and

"Moon-ih-LAH-uhv-uh"—unless I'm wrong.

We saw many nice parts of Moonilavu, such as churches

and streams and vegetable stands and

town, and tropical

forest trees such as

palm and teak, and

every so often

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to a young rubber tree with a white nosecoat.

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and say “that’s where my cousin lives,” but mostly we saw rubber trees. We saw rubber trees in all stages. There was a nursery, where the little rubber saplings are grown. Then there are stands of young trees, painted white (to protect them from the sun) and often held by twine so they grow straight and tall. When trees were more than seven years old we’d see them with the slanted cuts, indicating where they are milked every other day. Since it had been raining recently, many of these trees had plastic wrapping or overhangs over the cuts so that water wouldn’t get into the milk. All in all I got the impression that the rubber trees are coddled like precious children (until they’re cut down at 25 for the “good wood”).

All day, as much as possible, we have been practicing Malayalam language. We can say the equivalent of “howdy, how are you? I’m fine, yes, no, what is your name, my name is, thank you very much.”

Back at the house, waiting for lunch to be ready, we read a little, but Shon,



there's shon

who will be three in April, decided we should be playing noise games with



one of these people has too much energy

him. We practiced all of our Malayalam with Shon. No matter what we tried to

say, he would giggle and say things like “doh!” and “gee!” Either we weren’t saying any of the words correctly, or that kid has a learning problem (who’s going to break the



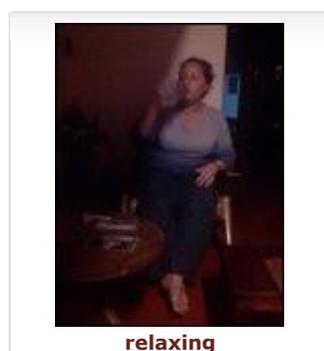
dinner

news to his parents?). We played some peek-a-boo, and I got one real good scare into him, before it was time for another great lunch.

After lunch we had a couple of hours to relax, nap, shower, read, etc...

Manoj arranged for a car to pick us up at 3:00 for a trip to the tea plantations in a nearby mountain. Manoj got into the car with us, pointed at the driver, and said “that’s my cousin.”

The ride up the mountain took about an hour. The road was steep, narrow, and curvy. Amy didn’t like the drive much, because of the steepness of the road, and especially because of the steepness of the mountain where we to



relaxing

go more than a foot off of the road with no guardrails down a cliff. But I didn’t mind it much because at least we weren’t going extremely fast, the view was gorgeous, it was getting a lot cooler



Road to tea plantation

as we went higher (nearly a mile), and I had a nice monkey to watch hanging off the rear-view mirror.



(Note: in most of India the buses and cars had a picture of Ganesh up front; in most of Kerala there is usually a picture of Mary or Jesus, often with flashing LEDs around it; in this cousin's car was a monkey)

We drove through gorgeous tea fields in the hill station of Vagamon. They looked a little like grape orchards only the plants were shorter and much denser. (PIX OF TEA PLANTS) Manoj and cousin drove us to a small pine forest that the government had started atop one of the mountains, and seemed really pleased to be able to show this to us. I'm afraid we disappointed them by not being very impressed and wanting to leave. We wanted to leave not just because we've been in so many California pine forests, but because our car phobia gets much worse at night—this is a message we would have a hard time conveying for the rest of the trip.

On the way down they asked if we wanted to see various things (such as a monastery) and we said no to all of them—trying to cite our concern about wanting to get home before dark— but we said yes to the tea factory. So we drove along a tea factory, and Manoj got out to chat for a while with the guard. While he was chatting Amy and I were overwhelmed by the smell of tea, as if we were one small car in a giant swirling teapot world.

Manoj came back, and said in hushed tones that we could tour the factory, but not take any pictures. At the door to the factory we took off our shoes and stepped in and walked up to the second (top) floor. A pile of leaves was being brought to a shaking machine where a woman encouraged twigs and non-tea-leaves off the



conveyor. The leaves then dropped to the first floor where they went through a few stages of mixing, heating, drying, possibly fermenting (I may not have heard that right), more cooking and drying, and finally a series of shakers that would sort the tea particles according to grade (i.e. size). At many of the steps we were able to hold and smell the developing product.

Outside the factory, we spoke to the manager in his office for a few minutes. All the while I wasn't sure if we were supposed to be slipping somebody some money, based on the hush-hush way that Manoj had brought us in there, but we never did (and Manoj almost never did). We had enjoyed the tour very very much—a real highlight of the trip—and asked if we could purchase tea. They didn't have a shop there, but were able to pull together enough so we could buy ten bags for our friends back home. The driver bought about as many bags (only enough to give to his very favorite cousins?).

We said we wanted to get back to Pappachan's house (the driving-after-dark thing, remember) but apparently

that's not what they heard, because next thing you know they'd driven us up another small mountain to view the sunset and a nice temple and church from a rocky hilltop. I'm sure it would have been a very nice place to view the sunset, and may have been so romantic that Amy and I would not have been able to prevent ourselves from making out right there in front of Manoj and any cousins who may have been watching, but we had to disappoint them and insist on going home. Still not understanding our phobia, they convinced themselves that we must just be tired and so drove us home (before dark) so we could get some rest.



Back at the home stay, safe and alive no problem, we were treated to fantastic fried bananas and coffee while we read and rested by the screen door.

Dinner was great again, of course, and our hands were entirely clean above the knuckles. Our after-dinner conversation covered more politics of USA and India and Pakistan (election tomorrow), fuel prices, American customs of marriage/divorce, work, relatives and friends that live in America, child-rearing, and so on.

- Next entry: [Strike Day - Tuesday](#)
- Previous entry: [Get on the bus, comrade](#)
- More Moonilavu pictures [here](#)
- [Index of all blog entries](#)