

Dispatch from India: A taste of home

By TALIA TIFFANY, Special to Crossroads
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Talia Tiffany (second from right) is with friends at a celebration of India's Independence Day (Aug. 15). Courtesy Talia Tiffany

Since my frightful, yet strangely calming, arrival at the airport, my "trip" has slowly transformed into my new life.

I have adjusted to India -- to watching motorcycles whip past cars and women riding side saddle while holding down the tails of their saris, just inches away from crashing at every moment; to cows wandering the streets as if it is their natural domain; to little tea shops dotting the street, with men crowded around dressed in lungis and chatting away in Tamil. I've adjusted to the constant pouring of monsoons, to getting soaked through, drying off before bed, and waking up the next day to get wet all over again. I've gotten used to the shouts of locals from crowded cars; to riding on public buses so jam-packed that people hang on outside the door; to the smell of cow dung mixed with masala. I have grown accustomed to eating with only my right hand, a challenge for a clumsy lefty.

I have learned the differences between American and Indian English. I can point out Tamil, Hindi and Malayalam writing. I have grown used to not understanding conversations in the hall and to teachers making jokes in their native language, sharing with students of their own background. I now merely need to look to one of my dorm mates for a translation of a sarcastic remark in Hindi. Bombay (Mumbai) versus New Delhi debates don't evoke any curiosity in me anymore; they feel as natural as the Yankees versus Red Sox rivalry. Magic Masala Lay's are my new favorite flavor potato chip, and I have acquired typical Indian tastebuds -- I like my food spicy and my desserts sinfully sweet. Teatime has become a staple of my day, sitting around a table chatting with friends, my hand curled around a cup of hot tea (more hot milk and sugar with a splash of flavor than actual tea), nibbling on samosas.

One afternoon two friends and I went to our favorite local eatery -- Tava, a vegetarian restaurant just across the street from school, where you can get an aloo parata, gobi masala and lime soda for 40 rupees, the equivalent of one dollar.

Side by side, the three of us marched across the familiar street, looking both ways before deciding in what order we should dodge the oncoming hazards. Safely making it across the street, as we always miraculously do, we walked into the restaurant, plopped down and ordered our meal.

The three of us, all American exchangers, began to reminisce of food back home -- Reese's, Hershey's chocolate, "proper" pizza, takeout Chinese, Subway sandwiches, Mexican food and, of course, our families' specialties.

"Man, I'm really craving some Sour Patch Kids!" one friend said.

"You know, since I'm going to the states for winter break, I could bring some stuff home for you guys," I casually suggested.

They both turned, looking at me with blank stares while processing what I had said. They were overjoyed with the news that I would gladly be their personal American food pack mule, but this accidental slip started a new topic of conversation. I am no longer just a visitor in India -- I am at home here and will be a visitor in my birthplace, at least for now.

Talia Tiffany, a student at Wilmington Friends School, is spending her junior year in India on the SAGE Program at the Kodaikanal International School in the state of Tamil Nadu.