

India has proved different to Europe on many levels, some of which I was prepared for and some not. When I first stepped off the aeroplane, the colours, the noise and the heat were the first things which struck me, having left grey, cold and drizzly Heathrow just hours before. Now I have been here a few months I am used to all this, but am continuing to be surprised by other aspects of India and Indian life.



We have visited Aligar – a dominantly Muslim city, Bodh Gaya – the Buddhist capital of the world and Rishikesh – a Ganges-side town, heaving with Ashrams and Hindu pilgrims. We joined in celebrations for Diwali, Eid and Christmas and have been very impressed by how the religions get along, and join in each other's celebrations rather than ignoring them or claiming to find them offensive as is often the case in England.



The poverty here is different from that of Europe. During my stay in Patna whilst teaching the Sophia Centre for underprivileged children, the poverty has become more real to me. It was of course eye-opening to see the extent of the poverty in one of India's poorest regions, but what surprised me most was how wrong my pre-conceived notions about poor children. I had imagined that they would be less lively and enthusiastic than children back home, but in fact the children I met and taught were no different the children in England and were, if anything, more enthusiastic. Each class had its joker and its genius, but even the naughty ones asked for homework and were incredibly eager to learn. This was one of the things I found saddest about the poverty in India: meeting children with so much potential and knowing that they can't afford to achieve all that they are capable of.



*At the Sophia Centre, Patna*

All the people we have met here have been so hospitable and welcoming, helping us find our feet and our way around. You really can make a new friend in minutes in India. At the same time, we have found that people on the streets pay us too much attention, particularly in Patna where not many tourists venture! When we went the Patna book-fair the same thing happened, except this time the cameras were in the hands of news reporters, and "Two Foreign Ladies at Book Fair" titled an article in The Hindustan Times the following day!



*photos: Lolín Menéndez rscj*

My experience in India has been very thought provoking, particularly when we encounter things that are ordinary here but unheard of in England; for example, arranged marriages are making more and more sense to me! So far, all my memories of India will be fond

ones. Even some experiences which were frustrating at the time are funny now, and have given us something to write home about. Never a dull moment in India.

*Emily and Carolien are the two volunteers who came through AMASC to work at Sophia Centre in Patna. They stayed for two months, living in the community and teaching English to the small children.*



*Written by Emily Boyd from England Carolien Maas from The Netherlands shared the experience*