

Host Institution: Symbiosis International University

Home Institution: University of Ottawa

Type of Exchange: Study India Program (SIP)

Term and Year: Summer Semester, August 2017

Experience in India: Prior to heading to India, I did not know what to expect in terms of the access I would have to essentials and products that I'm used to having access to in Canada. As well, my parents were also very concerned about my safety in India. Upon my arrival to India, specifically Pune, I learned that in the area we were in had plenty of access to mostly everything that we were used to having back in Canada and that the city was incredibly safe. As we did not travel to any other parts of India I cannot speak on the safety and quality of other areas but I can assure parents and incoming students that Pune is incredibly safe, as it is mainly a University city and there are students almost everywhere you go. The people in Pune are also extremely friendly and helpful. I never once felt scared or unsafe when traveling during the day or at night, in my experience it is a very safe location as far as India is concerned. It is still a good idea to be aware of your surroundings in the country and be wary of your belongings, but you definitely do not need to worry about the safety in Pune.

The accommodations that were provided to us were incredible. It was the first year in which new accommodations had been built right next to the airport, the rooms were large, contained a washroom, two sinks, a TV, a mini balcony to hang clothing on, large windows, two desks, two twin size beds and a mini fridge. The rooms also provided a fan and air conditioner which you would use as you pleased. We were all pleasantly surprised at the standard of the accommodations, having Western and comfortable accommodations was definitely very much appreciated by the students as it helped us with some of the culture shock we faced in India. Sometimes, the washrooms and facilities when you are out in public are not very sanitary (or do not have toilets at all) therefore coming back to a nice clean room was something that helped us at the end of our long days. The only minor setback of this accommodation is that it was about a 30 minute to 1 hour drive (depending on traffic) to the main campus, where many of our activities and workshops were held. Overall, the frequent drive was nice, as we had a driver who brought us into the city when we needed to go and it was a nice chance to see the city, or catch up on sleep, during the drive. We were also given food options in the schools on-site cafeteria, the chef, Jimmy, did a wonderful job with the food and he

was extremely accommodating on days when we wanted food that was not Indian or if we were out during the day he would pack us food to go. We were able to get fruit bowls and omelets every morning which was a wonderful start to the day! There were also lots of options in the area for more Western food, for anyone who didn't want Indian food. Although the restaurants are a little bit more expensive than the dining hall most of us found it worth it to get some comfort food, and the meals were usually around 5-15 Canadian dollars, depending on what you bought. For the most part the food was still very cheap by Canadian standards. There is a grocery store called Dorabjee's about a 10 minute walk from the accommodations where you can buy snack foods, fruit, water, toiletries and pretty much anything you might need. About a 15 minute walk away there is amazing restaurants, La Bottega is one, which serves Brazilian food, it is an amazing and tasty place to eat, there is also a fantastic ice cream place right next door called Cream Store. Along another strip nearby there is also the best restaurant and probably my favourite of all the food we ate, called Bayman, which was an Afghan restaurant. There are also tons of places around to get pizza, Subway and waffles. Not too far away is Phoenix Mall which is another great place to get food court food, such as McDonald's, Burger King, KFC and other popular fast food chains. Basically, there are tons of places that will accommodate everyone's food choices.

As far as interactions with other students go it was very easy to make friends with the Indian students, as the dorm and food area was attached to the campus where the classes took place. The students are also very friendly and welcoming to foreigners, many will greet you right away and if you strike up a conversation with someone you will find that many of the students are very receptive to getting to know you. The only issue in making long-lasting friendships with the Indian students was that our daily schedules were packed with workshops and activities, and most of the time the schedule didn't run on time, so given that and the lack of free time we had it was difficult sometimes to make plans to meet with the Indian students.

The program directors, such as Mrunal, Shervevar, Bhkati and Ashwini, all did a wonderful job in helping us out and organizing the program for us. We really appreciate all the hard work and coordination that all of the directors did in order to ensure that our time in India was fantastic. They were all very accommodating to what we wanted to do and a few times when we had concerns on some of the activities or when we wanted to switch out one workshop for something else that we preferred they were extremely accommodating in listening to us and made sure that all the activities and workshops were on topics that we were interested in. I cannot thank them all enough for the wonderful work they put in, they truly made our experience in India unique.

In terms of cultural differences and culture shock there is definitely quite the difference between Indian and Canadian culture. However, I did not feel that being in India felt like a drastic change for me personally. That being said, the environment and way of life in India is not at all what we are accustomed to in Canada. Some things to be aware of are the differences in the organization and infrastructure within India and the sanitation, these are probably the most significant changes that you will face in India. One issue is that it is difficult to adjust to is the organization and timing of how things are run in India. As a Canadian there were definitely quite a few times where I was frustrated that things started a few hours late, or someone didn't show up when they were supposed to but that is just the way things run in India so it is best to always bring something to occupy you wherever you go because there will likely be lots of periods of waiting for people during your stay. My group and I would bring books and pre-download movies to watch while waiting, as long as you keep occupied and don't expect for things to run on time as they would in Canada you will be fine. Lastly, sanitation was another big change that was at times hard to deal with. Overall, in Pune the sanitation isn't that bad, even when you're out in public you will be able to find washrooms that you can use, however they won't always be very clean and occasionally you will find yourself having to pee in an Indian toilet. One tip in regards to sanitation is to bring/buy lots of hand sanitizer, I went through many bottles while I was there, as most public places do not have soap in the washroom. Also, a good thing to bring when out in public is either toilet paper or baby wipes, carrying these around will honestly save your life when you have to use a less-than ideal washroom, and again, often times the washrooms in India do not have toilet paper. After a while you will get used to the style of washrooms and it really isn't too bad, but you can expect to be a bit shocked at first, so just make sure you're prepared and if you are it really isn't that bad at all!

Overall, I would recommend this program to anyone who might be interested in learning more about India and it's culture, it is a good option for first time-travelers to India. The program gives you a chance to learn about Indian culture and to experience it first hand. Living in the area for a month really changes your perspective on the people and the culture and by the end you feel as though you have integrated into the community. After this program I would feel much more confident going around India and traveling as I know what to expect, it is a great starting point for those who are interested in travelling around India. While in India I was also able to meet so many students who are from others areas in India who offered to take me to visit other parts of the country. That's why this program is so great, you can make connections with people in the country and gain a deeper understanding for Indian culture which can allow you to explore more of the country when you are done. Living in a new place, even if only for a month, really changes your perspective on your own life, such as the values you hold dear. For one

thing, I have learned that it is better not to rush through everything and to take my time and not always be in a hurry. I have also learned the value of hospitality and welcoming others into your home as I was shown so much kindness by the people in India who welcomed us into their homes despite barely knowing us. It was an incredible trip and I would 100% recommend it to everyone else, you will discover so much about yourself and it will be the greatest learning experience that you could ever have.