

March/April News Bulletin from Goa

The last two months have been a time of anticipation for everyone at Bethesda Life Centre, with exams at the end of March, followed by an end of year school performance and the start of the long summer holiday in April. For most of March all the children were studying very hard for a week of exams and were not allowed to watch any videos or TV.

There was also great anticipation of India progressing in the cricket world cup, but the children could only hear the scores relayed to them from the internet on my mobile phone. When it came to the final, exams were over and they were all allowed to watch it on the big screen that I had set up in the school. Everyone was jubilant when India won, except for me. I have always had a soft spot for Sri Lanka, although I kept quiet to avoid spoiling the party afterwards. The streets were jam packed with traffic at the local 'Trafalgar Square' in Panjim, and there was much blowing of horns and banging of drums that night on the street outside my flat.



Exams were followed by the first Annual day celebration for the school since it was opened in 2009. After a week given over to practicing in various groups, the pupils performed dance and drama, with singing and playing instruments under my direction. Despite the disorganisation behind stage with no one knowing what was happening next, the performance went very well and there were many appreciative comments, especially for The Welcome Song that I had written. Unfortunately there were not many people in the audience, because, being a school for children who have been orphaned, there were not the parents that you usually expect at a school concert.

Now it is holiday time for the pupils and everyone is enjoying the opportunity of going swimming or fishing, watching videos, playing cricket, or going to the beach. The school bus that we normally use for such trips seats 16, but on the first occasion we went to the beach, we managed to fit 48 older boys and adults. It would be fun to see how many we can fit into the car I have just bought, a Tata Nano, the world's cheapest and one of the smallest from the outside, though rather like Dr Who's Tardis from an inside perspective.

I have been waiting in anticipation for several weeks and I will not miss travelling in and out of Santa Cruz on the very congested buses that sometimes take nearly an hour if they're empty, stopping everywhere to wait for more passengers. In the meantime I have made good use of the bicycle, having repaired the damage done by the kids when travelling three astride. I have enjoyed cycling round the coast and exploring some of the local beaches and coves often covered in beautiful shells and fringed by palm trees.



The sea is a bit too warm for swimming faster than a very relaxed breaststroke – I would prefer it a bit colder to contrast with the air temperature, since it must be in the mid thirties at present, with the sun high in the sky at midday. During the holidays I had decided to relax in the mornings before going anywhere near the children, for as soon as you do they all want your attention, and with 140 of them split between the three houses, there is never any time for yourself. However, I have recently been asked to organise a reading programme for the small boys who live in the school building, making use of the internet to project online stories and talking books onto the screen. We split into 2 groups according to age and read stories aloud together or play literacy games – one of the boys is as young as 3, whilst the oldest is 12.

For those aged between 8 and 12, I have also organised an afternoon swimming programme during the holiday to teach them to swim. Unfortunately this means a return to travelling on the congested buses, taking turns to go in three different groups each with 8 pupils. None of them have been to the swimming pool before so it is a great treat, but not without risk. They have no fear of the water and are so confident and excited that they need watching all the time. The pool is outdoors and the grounds are extensive with 4 large swimming areas of various depths, including a 50 metre pool with lanes and a pool with high diving boards that they would probably jump off if they got half the chance. Admission to the pool is very controlled with everyone requiring Lycra shorts and a medical certificate from the doctor. For 25 children this took several days to organise with repeat visits to the doctor until everyone was given a clean bill of health.

If I have the time and energy after going to the pool, I can join with the older boys for a game of cricket at the local field. Any earlier than 5 o'clock and it's not possible to do anything active since the weather is getting very hot and humid. In the evenings I continue to take turns in visiting each of the three homes in order to lead worship and bible study. After that, at about 8 pm, everyone has dinner, cooked by the older boys. Recently the home has lost its cook, and as a result each of the older boys has to take turns to cook the meals themselves. However they are soon becoming very proficient - the food is often very tasty and nutritious despite the limited ingredients. Rice is nearly always on the menu but alongside that there is usually some sort of pulse, vegetable dhal and occasionally meat or fish. In the evening, the bread man often passes on his bicycle and it is quite a treat for them have a bread roll with their meal. When there is a birthday in one of the homes I usually buy them a cake, but cutting it into 50 equal pieces is more hassle than baking it.



Everyone looks forward to getting more fruit in the summer months as the mangos and jack fruit ripen. Up till now the children only get fruit if someone buys it specially, but in May fruit becomes plentiful, especially in the backyard of the school. In the meantime, they use the un-ripened mangos to make a very bitter tasting pickle, throwing stones up into the trees to knock them down, and sometimes incurring the wrath of their neighbours. Coconuts also continue to fall regularly, though so far I have been lucky enough to avoid them.

As far as drinks are concerned, there is a great variety of fruit juices, lassis and milk shakes available in the small general stores and cafes that line the streets. One such drink which all the kids love is Badam, made from a mixture of almonds, milk and sugar. Every drink always tastes very sweet, including the tea (chai) which is boiled in milk together with lots of sugar and sometimes ginger. When they run out of milk or sugar at the home, which is not surprising given the amount they use, nobody drinks it. On the street you will also find many ice cream bicycles as well as mobile sugar cane crushers selling sugar cane juice mixed with lime and ginger - very tasty and apparently medicinal as well.



It's very easy to forget how important it is to drink plenty of water throughout the day in order to avoid getting dehydrated. Although there is no shortage of water on tap, I need to buy bottled water to make sure that I don't get ill. So far I've kept very well despite the lack of hand washing in food preparation and the infections that easily spread in the homes when children sometimes share towels and bed sheets. Recently one of the children's heads needed shaving because of an outbreak of scabies.

Quite a few of the older boys have learnt how to cut hair, and often make a very good job of it, although recently one novice barber made such a mess of cutting another's hair that it needed shaving completely. So far I've only trusted the professional barber who only charges 30 rupees, the equivalent of about 40 pence, and doesn't expect a tip either. The last time I went, I made the mistake of giving him a 500 rupee note thinking it was only a 50, and saying 'Keep the change'. Fortunately, for my sake, he said 'No', otherwise he could have taken the rest of the week off. The older boys are also particularly good at making their own entertainment - singing, dancing and playing instruments - and are very creative in constructing things, including a tree house in the back yard which has proved stable enough for four people to sleep in. We shall see when it comes to the monsoon how well it holds up.



In the monsoon season from June to September, all the restaurant shacks, that line the tourist beaches of Goa, are taken down before they get washed away. When visiting some of these places you start to feel a bit more anonymous amongst all the other tourists. However, my favourite place to chill out in the late afternoon is Siridao, a fishing village near Santa Cruz, completely off the beaten track as far as tourism is concerned with traditional fishing boats lined up along the beach ready to go out to sea in the early morning. As I cycle through the village everybody says 'Hello' or looks up and waves. At the end of the beach are a couple of shacks made out of logs and palm branches, and it was particularly enjoyable watching the cricket on their TV, with the waves rolling in behind.

I continue to go for a jog and swim most mornings at the beach where I stay at Mirimar, although recently one of the many stray dogs has befriended me and wants to play every time I start running, jumping up and playfully trying to bite my shorts. I'm slightly concerned because I've not bothered to have a rabies jab and dogs do have a habit of running after cyclists and joggers. Buffalo and pigs can also be seen roaming the streets of Santa Cruz, and recently a pig in the garden next door to the big boys home gave birth to 10 piglets. I expected the kids to want to make them into Goan sausages, a local delicacy, but the pigs are wild and carriers of disease and can often be seen feeding on the rubbish that accumulates in the so called "Rubbish free zones" in Santa Cruz.



Presently the older boys are on a 10 day camp, staying in a residential bible college while its students are away, near a town called Ponda, about 30 miles inland from Santa Cruz. The building is situated deep in the woods, amongst many cashew, banana, mango, jack fruit and mango trees. These provide a constant source of fruit to eat, especially for the monkeys that are often spotted in the trees nearby, while the boys have been continuously busy making mango juice.



The house is also very close to a river where they have been swimming on each of my day visits to the camp. The boys need continuous supervision because the river gets deep very quickly and some of them are unable to swim. Furthermore, on the most recent occasion we were told to get out by one of the local fishermen because crocodiles had recently been spotted on the banks of the river.



The girls have also had two outings to the nearby beach during their holiday and I have had the responsibility of helping supervise them. On the most recent trip, the school bus was not available and we found out how many children we could fit into the 'Nano' – 10 including me, and not even a risk assessment in sight. Some of the younger ones had never been in the sea before, and they loved every minute, spending over 3 hours splashing about in the water and squealing with delight. As they gained confidence, they gradually ventured into deeper water, and I had the difficult job of trying to keep count of them all, not an easy task when there are 46 of them. The lifeguard on duty seemed particularly concerned that we were swimming between the yellow flags, until suddenly he removed the flags completely, leaving only the red ones. I'm not sure what this signified – perhaps he was no longer on duty and was indicating that he took no further responsibility.



I am never quite sure what the rules are when swimming at the beaches, since the lifeguards often have different things say about where to swim in relation to the flags. There is always an abundance of lifeguards on duty, but they seem to have very little to do most of the time, playing about on the jet ski rescue vehicles when they're not dozing off in the high chairs or sleeping under the palm constructed shelters.



The rules of the road are also very peculiar at times, and it has taken me a month of driving in the 'Nano' to get used to the traffic conditions. In itself, the car is easy to drive and park, and feels very robust, considering it was so cheap to buy. However, you have to be constantly vigilant of cars and scooters approaching from all directions, often driving on the wrong side of the road, sometimes without lights, or if they do have them, blinding you by leaving them on full beam. At the same time you have to be constantly on the lookout for cyclists and pedestrians who never have any lights or bright clothing on, as well as numerous pot holes and inconspicuous but lethal speed bumps. If someone flashes their lights it means 'I'm coming, get out of my way', and because nobody uses mirrors to look behind them, horns are constantly used to say, 'I'm behind you, get out of my way'. Even a tiny gap between you and the car in front of you will be filled by someone honking who is desperate to overtake.

There are no traffic lights at any of the junctions so nobody knows who should give way, and although there are roundabouts, I have just discovered that the opposite rules apply compared to driving in the UK. Once you are on the roundabout, you have to give way to cars that are entering at each of the junctions. Fortunately I learnt this without having an accident, although I did have several close shaves before I realised. I also got stopped by the police for driving the wrong way down a one way street in the city of Panjim – the road signs were very unclear, or at least that was my excuse. Luckily I was only fined a couple of pounds, although initially the policeman was going to fine me more. Depending on how they feel they can charge what they like, for whatever offence they can find, and will sometimes pocket the money instead of filling in any forms.

Anyway, I've survived another two months, and I'm actually beginning to feel quite at home, despite all the unusual customs and conditions. I still find myself doing far too much each day, and need to learn to say 'no' to all the demands that are sometimes made of me. However I am really enjoying life here. Every day has its surprises and one never knows what to expect. I must remember that I have only come out on a 6 month Tourist Visa and need to book a return flight before it runs out at towards the end of July. I am due to return for 6 months in October after taking a holiday with my mum in Swanage and then teaching for a term in Orkney in order to earn some more money.

It would be great to see anyone who would like to visit from the UK for a holiday in Goa. I am staying in a big flat and there is plenty of room for visitors. Otherwise it would be lovely to hear your news, via email, telephone, Skype or letter. Here are my contact details:

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