

Ha (Helen)
University of Washington – Seattle
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Life at Rainforest Retreat

The frigid cold, gloomy weather, and absence of sun is what makes many Huskies agree that Winter Quarter at the University of Washington is the worst academic term to get through. While this has been a repeating pattern, the tradition of a terrible Winter Quarter was broken my senior year, during my research internship with Rainforest Retreat in India for my Environmental Studies Capstone Project. With preparation from both my Capstone studies and IE3 Global, I flew to South India mid-December to the rainforest I would call home for the next three months.



Figure 1: The one morning I woke up in time for a sunrise!

After a rushed 30+ hours spent with planes and an additional three-hour taxi ride from Mangalore Airport, I finally arrived at Rainforest Retreat around early afternoon. I was greeted by Mansha, the new manager, and Ravi, one of the local staff members with brilliant knowledge of the local species who lives on the site with his family. They showed me my room, a small cozy space with small steps leading to a desk and bed and told me a little bit about the facilities

for the interns such as solar-heated water. I had just missed lunch but was provided a bundle of small bananas and some of the best bread I've had in my life (Lakshmi is the main chef and married to Ravi; she bakes fresh whole-wheat bread in the kitchen's wood-fire oven). The rest of the day was spent with organizing a bit of my stuff I met Sujata, Anurag, and the other families and staff the next day, where I began to pick-up the daily routine of an intern by spending time with Mansha. For the first week or so, I learned about daily logistics of organic plantation and guesthouse work, the history of Rainforest Retreat, and getting familiar with the site.



Figure 2: These funnel spiders are everywhere, and a lot smaller than what this picture looks like.

Because Rainforest Retreat works directly with the Mojo Plantation, there is an abundance of research topics and activities to do here for interns. While the focus of my research shifted to sustainable eco-tourism, my daily schedule was a bit different everyday while still following a routine. Most days would involve me waking up, help prepare breakfast in the kitchen by 7:45/8AM, and end with bringing up the dishes after dinner was finished around 9PM. In between these times, I would guide the Ridge Walk, pick coffee, package spices, plant seedlings, socialize with guests, and help with any other plantation and guesthouse work as needed. My favorite days were ones that included agriculture or fieldwork activities, most

notably coffee picking, ginger harvesting and washing, sugar cane planting, and washing cows in the stream with Ravi! While these activities depend on the need of the site, the day is scheduled in accordance to meal timings. These are the times we eat with the guests and organize the rest of our day's activities to. Because I arrived during the peak Indian holiday time, I quickly adapted to the routine of Rainforest Retreat with the help of everyone on site.



Figure 3: A view from the Ridge Walk.

While Mansha was my supervisor for daily logistics, Sujata was my site supervisor and mentor that supplemented the scientific knowledge and academic resources for my research study. She provided me with research materials that helped guide my Environmental Studies Capstone Project and coordinate with my academic faculty back home. Both parties provided me with support in my research, as well as my adjustment to the new cultural setting of India. The support I received in both my host and home countries was essential for my successful experience at Rainforest Retreat. Because there was always work on the site with the addition of my independent research project, my biggest challenge was in time management and work-life

balance. To tackle these challenges, I had to learn how to prioritize, depend on others in a team setting, and hold myself responsible to a timeline schedule while practicing adaptability.

Practicing these skills, taking responsibility for my actions, and participating in all activities with a “yes-can-do” attitude for the different routines and programs we held was how I became an asset for Rainforest Retreat. Through this experience and everyone’s support, I was able to develop personal cross-cultural communication and professional project management skills.



Figure 4: Ginger harvesting and washing!

My first time abroad by myself, I came in excited but also intimidated by what life was going to experience while I was in India. While the IE3 orientation and testimonies from previous Rainforest Retreat interns helped me in my preparations, there are limits as to what one can learn before arriving at their host country. Growing up in the United States, India is known as a third-world country with poor sanitation, greatly overpopulated areas, and gender inequality issues for women. With these impressions, I was nervous as to how I would be treated as a single woman travelling on my own. However, I found that I was warmly welcomed by everyone at Rainforest Retreat, where women played an equal or greater role on the plantation. While there

are more cautions I had to take during my solo-travel week, I found India to be very modernized with many Westernized characteristics embedded in their modern culture. Over my three months in India, my impressions of it drastically broke away from its Americanized stereotypes into the realization of its complexity I have experienced only a small fraction of. I only wish I had known the degree of modernization in India prior to my arrival so I could have better navigated the traditional culture, its changes, and packed a more efficient wardrobe (aka spend less money on clothes I left back home).

India was a completely foreign country to me, I did not know its customs, history, politics, and languages before coming here. The language barriers were especially intimidating for me, as I had always been a translator for my non-English speaking parents. While the Goels and a few local staff speak fluent English, many of the staff and some guests do not. I felt heavily reliant on those that did speak fluent English, and often had to ask for clarification on simple tasks using body language. Because India is so diverse in its demographics, many speak 4-5 languages on average. The local staff interchange their languages when communicating with each other, making it difficult for interns (or anyone not speaking the same languages) to pick-up on them. You pick-up a couple phrases, but many of the communications happens via body language, facial expressions, and work ethic. While I did not become fluent in Kannada, Tulu, Tamil, or Hindi (just a few of the languages spoken on site), I do feel that my language ability improved through this experience compared to when I first arrived at Rainforest Retreat.

While the experience of Rainforest Retreat depends and differs on the person, I believe that anyone with an open-mind can find, discover, and/or develop something new about themselves and the place, they find themselves in. For me, Rainforest Retreat has given me the opportunity to apply both my academics and personal skills into a sustainable operation that

better people, nature, and society. Of course, there are times where I felt loneliness away from home, but the time I've spent bird-watching, interacting with cows and goats, and laughing over chai with the local families you live alongside with are an experience I will not get anywhere else. It's funny to think that I have a home and community halfway around the world in a country where I was a first-time visitor just a couple of months ago, but I am looking forward to my next adventure and stay in the beautiful rainforest of Southern India's Western Ghats.



Figure 4: Me with some of the baby livestock!

Tips for future interns:

- There will *always* be guests, so make time for yourself and any short travel plans ahead of time and do them when you can without hesitation!
 - Again, with the guesthouse, you will meet many interesting people from different backgrounds and places. While most of the guests are nice, there will be some people you don't get along or disagree with. In any case, do not take any comments as negative, but as an opportunity to grow professionally. You'll most often never see these guests ever again, so don't stress!

- Spend time with all the local staff, you will be working with them on a daily basis and they are your best guide, support, and friends navigating daily life on the retreat.
 - Also, **bring gifts** for the staff from your own home country to share with them!
- You will certainly feel at times and maybe even get into a routine where you feel that you don't have time, but it is essential you **make time for yourself** for your own activities.
- **Prioritize your tasks and practice time management** if you're conducting your own research project. There is always work to be done on the plantation, prioritize, use your judgement and manage the work with the rest of the team.
- **Ask questions!** The local staff are happy to talk and help you learn as much as possible during your stay. Sujata and Anurag are other great sources of information, but sometimes may be harder to reach depending on their schedule.



Figure 5: My last day with Sujata and Maya.