

Girlguiding Cleveland India 2018

On April 11th 2018 thirteen guiders met at Newcastle Airport to travel to India; to Sangam, the WAGGGS Centre in Pune and to take the Golden Triangle Tour.

We were primarily from Cleveland but were joined by Mary, a guiding friend from Toronto. A few of us knew each other well, some just occasionally and some hardly at all but by the end of it, we had all grown to know each other really well and shared some fantastic memories.

We arrived in Pune at lunchtime the following day after a long but thankfully uneventful journey via Dubai and Mumbai. Everyone's first impression of Sangam was that of a peaceful, tranquil oasis. How lovely to arrive after a long hot journey to a delicious lunch followed by a swim in the pool, bliss.



We were all pretty shattered so, after a tour of the centre and a delicious dinner, everyone had an early night.

On Friday we all ventured into Pune centre along with several of the volunteers from Sangam.

We had Therese from Germany, Anya from Austria, Fernanda from Mexico and Adele from Redcar! Adele has been working at Sangam as the Events Coordinator for a while so how lovely for us to see how she was enjoying her role and life out there. It was especially lovely for Judith, her old leader from when Adele was a Guide. All the staff there were great women, from all over the world, and so interesting to chat to about their guiding journeys that led them to Sangam.

We made our way into Pune via rickshaw, what an experience! Exhilarating or terrifying depending on your viewpoint! The day was spent wandering round the fruit and veg market, bangle alley, and various temples along the way culminating in a shopping session for glorious saris or punjabis, the traditional loose trousers and long top with a scarf outfit. So cool and comfortable. It was a sensory overload; noisy, colourful, smells of cinnamon, incense, spice, friendly faces all around.



That evening we enjoyed the Opening Ceremony. Each of us were welcomed in the traditional way with a flower garland, fresh coconut and a dab of cum-cum powder

on our foreheads. We sang together and heard more about Sangam and being part of the WAGGS family. We finally lit a flame on the beautiful ornate lamp and celebrated being a part of Guiding. It was a very special evening, making me, for one, reflect on how important symbols and ceremonies are and how they can make you feel part of something much bigger.



Day Two and we took a bus to one of Sangam's community partners Maher. In their own words:

Maher (in the Marathi language) means "Mother's Home": a haven of hope, belonging and understanding. Our mission is to help destitute women, children and men from all over India exercise their right to a higher quality of life, irrespective of gender, caste, creed or religion.

Again, we were greeted with cum cum powder and a welcome song sung by the children. We met the founder Sister Lucy Kurien, an inspirational strong woman, who had created, from nothing, homes all over the region for the destitute and the disadvantaged. We felt truly inspired by her and what she had achieved. We had a wander and then spent some time and some money in the shop – the residents make gorgeous purses, bags, jewellery etc. I felt honoured to have visited such a wonderful place and will never forget it. The energy and positive spirit at Maher was something we all took away with us.

Here is a link to the Maher website if you want to find out more:

<https://maherashram.org>



Our last night and day at Sangam were great fun, we had a night of a delicious banquet followed by lessons in Indian dancing (we were *terrible!*) then a wander around the local neighbourhood the next morning. The neighbourhood was peaceful, welcoming and friendly. We even got to visit an elderly lady who was a cook at Sangam in her home; it was lovely to see an ordinary Indian household.



With sadness we left Sangam and Pune and flew up to Delhi for the second part of our trip; the Golden Triangle Tour. For this part of our adventure, we had a tour bus (ably driven by the cool and collected Mr. Kapoor) Mr. Kapoor's son on cold drinks duty and our tour guide Nadeem. We were taken to some of the most iconic sights in India over the next three days, highlights were.....

A bicycle rickshaw around the narrow streets of Old Delhi, watched over by the monkeys followed by an amazing biryani for lunch washed down with a cold Kingfisher beer.

A walk through the Sikh temple in Delhi, Bangla Sahib Gurudwara, where we were all struck by the golden halls, the music and the generosity in the huge kitchen where

food was prepared every day for all to enjoy, particularly the needy.
The tomb of Emperor Humayun which was glorious but the fun part was chatting to lots of local school children and visitors who were curious about who we all were!



In Agra we of course visited the Taj Mahal. We had an early start to be there for sunrise, but it was worth it to see the marble change in the sunlight from grey to white to glistening. I also made my promise there, pretty emotional and quite cool to throw into conversation!



In Jaipur we spent some time in the markets there, Isobel and I certainly enjoyed choosing pashminas from the hundreds that were flamboyantly displayed for us. We were then taken to the Amber Fort. We ascended up the steep path to the Fort on the backs of elephants, two by two at a stately pace. Nicola's and mine was called Lucky! The fort was fab, so romantic and intricate in design. It was certainly very easy to conjure up images of glamorous Maharajas and Maharanis. The whole place had a wonderful symmetry, interspersed with gardens. We all loved it.



The final icing on the cake was dinner at one of the locations used in The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel!

We made our way back to Delhi and ended our tour with a trip to the Gandhi Museum, interesting and moving.



It was then time for the return journey home. For me, I would love to return to Sangam and India again. It exceeded all my expectations and was a great experience – thought provoking, funny, lively, tiring, moments of sadness and joy at Maher, beautiful and invigorating. I would recommend anyone to go.

Gemma Williams

1st Yarm Brownies.