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ONE WORLD ONE HOME



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LIVE-IN-LABS

AN EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS



AMRITA LIVE-IN-LABS is an internship program coordinated by The Center for Research in Advanced Technologies for Education (CREATE) at Amrita University. The program immerses university students in rural Indian villages, providing not only help and aid to the villages, but also serving as a two-way model of sharing and learning for both villagers and participating students.

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August 2015 I had the incredible chance to join one of the projects conducted by Live-in-Labs. The opportunity came when the team working in the Amrita CREATE office wanted to send a team to take some photos and videos of their projects in a tribal village called Komalikutty. A friend of mine working in Amrita University found out that they had a free spot in their car and arranged for me to come along. I have to confess that I felt very excited about it, but also a little bit scared to go in a place so different from Amritapuri, Amma's spiritual and cultural center in South India. The village was in the district of Idukki, about a 6 hour drive from Amritapuri.

Upon my arrival, a unique place was awaiting me: the green jungle was growing on massive mountains tall enough to touch the clouds, and small rivers with their waterfalls created a complex orchestra which, combined with

the animals singing from the deep woods, created an incredible melody. At that very moment I fully understood why Kerala is called "God's own country".

The first place we visited was the village school: a small building in concrete with only two rooms. The classroom was full of children and as we entered it, the students stood up and welcomed us in a very polite way, saying "Namah Shivaya". There, I met the group of youth interning at the Live-in-Labs: Brandon, Kim, Sharla and Heather from Ryerson University (Canada) and Fathima, Sasikala, Akash, Happy and Sherlyn from Amrita University. Just a couple of hours later Swami Jnanamritananda Puri arrived. He is not only one of Amma's disciples, but also the coordinator of the projects in that area. He knew I had been involved in AYUDH for many years, so he suggested the idea of bringing AYUDH to these villages, to push youth to be more engaged in improving society.



At lunch time, instead of going to eat with the other youth I decided to stay with the report team who were taking pictures around the village. The houses were really poor: most were 4 walls with a roof made from a blue plastic sheet held in place by just a few wood branches. It was monsoon (heavy rain) season at the time, and I couldn't believe how such delicate roofs could protect against the heavy rain. Some houses didn't even have a front door, how could they keep wild animals away at night?

“Every university student craves the opportunity put the knowledge learnt in class into practise, and Amrita Live-in-Labs gives the unique opportunity to engage in field work while living with rural communities in India.”

In the afternoon, while the girls were conducting the literature class for the women of the village, Brandon, Akash and I went to play football with the boys. We played on a ginger field, which was bumpy after harvest. Despite that, the village guys were playing barefoot. It was the first chance I had to get to know some youth from the village. Even though only a couple of them could speak English, somehow we managed to understand each other. ▶

- ▶ After the match Swami Jnanamritananda Puri introduced me as a member of AYUDH Europe and took the chance to explain what AYUDH was about. So he asked them if they wanted to be part of it and that's how AYUDH Komalikutdy began.

“The first place we visited was the village school: a small building in concrete with only two rooms. The classroom was full of children, and as we entered it all the students stood up and welcomed us in a very polite way, with the Indian greeting ‘Namah Shivaya’.”

When we got back to the school I could talk a little bit with the girls from Live-in-Labs. They explained me how they were using tablets to teach the children how to do math and literature, and how this method has brought huge improvements. They also described how the kids, who couldn't really speak English at the beginning, improved their language skills and started to speak spontaneously in English after only a few days.

The next day, the team had a presentation in a high school about alcohol awareness. They organised a little performance at the end of which the Canadian



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youth shared their personal stories about alcohol abuse. All of them knew at least one victim from alcohol abuse; hearing their stories was really touching. One student of the school wanted to share his story. His brother died from problems related to alcoholism, so he offered to be the “alcohol awareness” ambassador in the school in order to prevent alcoholism and promote a healthier lifestyle. After the presentation, a lot of students from the school wanted to talk with us. Many of them had never seen a Westerner in real life, so they didn’t want to miss the opportunity to talk with us.

At that point, the report team was supposed to go back to Amritapuri. But since I managed to get along with the rest of group very well, they offered me the chance of staying with them one day longer. I accepted immediately!

The next morning we had to leave quite early. Everybody was so sad. As a parting gift, some of the youth from the village wanted to show us their work. So they brought us to the deepest part of the jungle, where there are the cardamom fields, and told us all the stories of the village. Suddenly we reached the stockhouse, a wooden building on top of a rock cliff where they store their spices. An old man lives there, he has nothing: just few steel pots and a few clothes. But despite his poor condition, he insisted on offering us a cup of chai tea and proudly showed us how he lived. After this amazing trip in the jungle, we immediately realised that these people were sharing the most precious thing they had: their experiences. And in just few days I was feeling a part of their family.

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During their time in the village, the group collected important information on children’s BMI, studied how technology improved their studies, and the impact of the group’s activities in the village. Every university student craves for the opportunity to put into practise the knowledge learnt in class, and Amrita Live-in-Labs gives the unique opportunity of engaging in field work while

living with rural communities in India. It’s a precious experience which not only improves you professionally but also enriches you personally. Even though I was a foreigner, coming from 10 thousands kilometers away, they made me feel at home and treat me as a family member. The close contact with the local people taught me how, with all our differences, we are the very same. We are all members of one big family, humanity, and we are all living in a big home, the world. I cannot recommend this program enough! ●

Author Robert Westmore, left.



MORE ABOUT AMRITA LIVE-IN-LABS

Amrita Live-in-Labs, an education program organised by Embracing the World, is an experiential learning program that facilitates the research, development, and deployment of sustainable solutions for current challenges faced by tribal communities. The program, which can last from one month to one semester, allows participants to interact with rural populations while living in their communities in order to gain a better understanding of the challenges they face.

For more information about joining a project, please visit <https://www.amrita.edu/international/live-in-labs>