

Kerala, India: Five Days Inside the Ashram

Day 1

I arrive drenched in sweat to the small town where the Amritapuri ashram is located, cursing myself for coming to this swampland during one of the hottest and most humid months of the year. It starts to drizzle as I attempt haggling with the rickshaw driver and, shortly after, I notice that the metal frame in my backpack is starting to rust. I blame India immediately. It was one of those frustrating days on the road where every mishap and slight deviation from my plan sent me into an emotional tailspin. Very similar to drinking too many mimosas at brunch, I've come to believe that India can bring out the very best and worst in those who dare to visit (specifically in my case, sensitive weak-bellied westerners). That might sound extreme, but India is the quintessential land of extremes.

As I look out to the dozens of rickshaw drivers who are out scouting for customers, it occurs to me that I might be the biggest idiot for being another cliché backpacker schlepping out to Amma's ashram to find god or whatever. I remind myself that I've come here to do some ethnographic research and hopefully get one of those magical hugs from Amma, the famous guru whose mere human embrace can supposedly transmit the breadth and depth of all the love and knowledge in the universe to anyone lucky enough to touch her. I'm skeptical but beyond intrigued.

The Amritapuri ashram is a huge complex painted entirely in a shade of pink that resembles the foul Pepto-Bismol of my youth. Amma is revered as "mother" by her devotees and is even considered by some to be a living saint. I'm not a devotee by any stretch (I'd only heard of her three months prior) but I want to get in on the action and see what all the fuss is about. Apparently so do thousands of others—the ashram receives 15,000 visitors annually and is home to 3,000 permanent residents. There are about 500 westerners living here, most of which are French. I have no idea what Amma's marketing strategy is in France, but it's obviously working.

Inside the ashram, images of Amma's face are practically everywhere—inside the elevators, kitchens, mess halls, temple, bathrooms, yoga studio, dorm rooms, the meditation rooms—and it dawns on me that the ashram is a bubble. There's no need to leave unless you must run an extraordinary errand, and I wonder if this was by design. It feels like a small college campus minus the drugs (I think?) and intramural sports. I check in at the international office where I hand over my passport and complete a form with my personal information. Aside from the standard first name and surname fields, there is a field in which I have the option to write my 'spiritual name'. Hmmm. I had not considered this prior to my arrival. Eventually I settle on "Milkweed" since "Moonflower" or "Morning Glory" seemed a bit too on the nose. I smugly applaud my cleverness.

Later, while chatting with a veteran French devotee about my upcoming travel plans to Madurai, she advises me it's best to buy my train ticket as soon as possible. I waste no time taking a rickshaw right back to the same train station I'd been just a few hours before and spend twenty minutes in some semblance of a queue at the ticket counter. Approximately 10-15 other customers interrupt our 7-minute conversation and I'm ultimately told by the weary ticket attendant that while it's *possible* to buy a ticket, I cannot make a reservation for the train because the reservation office is closed. Dealing with this sort of bureaucratic catch-22 has become a regular part of my experience in India, not to mention my own personal hell. I leave the train station without a ticket and once again step out into the gaggle of rickshaw drivers who are waiting to accost me. During the 20-minute ride back to Amritapuri, I decide that the real world is too annoying and I very much want to be back inside that cushy pink bubble.

Day 2

My room and board costs about \$3 per night. Included with my stay are three basic meals and chai in the afternoon. After three or four meals of the same rice and sambal, I decide it's time to venture over to what's known as "the Western Canteen," a roped-off area of the mess hall/auditorium where mostly grouchy older white people serve carrot salad, pumpkin pie and other fare one might find in a health food co-op café. The Indian/western divide here is pervasive and slightly off-putting, being that there are a lot of separate services for westerners and Indians. There are containers of dish soap at the western café sinks whereas there are none to be found on the Indian side, reaffirming my belief that westerners are clearly way more neurotic about hygiene.

After lunch, I go to wash my plate and make the apparently very obvious mistake of setting it down in the sink. A woman sees this and rushes over to tell me that I should never, *ever* do this because the sinks are dirty and people often spit in them. I follow her to dry my plate and cutlery where she raises her eyebrow toward a bit of whipped cream that remains on the back of my spoon. Who is this person and why is she tailing me like some sort of cleanliness police? I quickly swallow my contempt the next day when I see an older gentleman shoot a literal snot rocket into the same sink.

Every night, there are *bhajan* (devotional hymn) sessions in which devotees and visitors are invited to sing to the images of Amma and various Hindu deities. I try to make myself feel at home by incorporating Christian devotional practices from my childhood, and for a while it kind of works. In my thoughts, I try swapping out Amma's name for the Virgin Mary's and this makes lines such as "I bow down to her who is all humble" feel a little less foreign. However, once we get into more culturally specific verses such as "I bow down to her who has four arms," and "I bow down to her whose mouth is red from chewing betel," the illusion is thrown off completely.

Day 3

I have a migraine when I wake up. The air feels heavier than normal and it rains all day long. For some reason the ashram Internet café is closed when I need it most and I'm starting to get restless. What is it that people do here all day? How do they plan their lives without access to Internet? Luckily by now I've procured a ticket to Madurai after having to take yet another long rickshaw ride to the train station. In a couple days I'll depart from a train station in Trivandrum, a larger city that is 2.5 hours away. I feel relieved to have secured a bed in a second-class car with air conditioning. Once again I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul! Bureaucratic nonsense and 96% humidity be damned.

While going about my day, I talk to a few westerners who say that they'd come to the ashram intending to stay a few weeks and ended up staying months or years. Mostly I see people sitting around chatting or staring into space. Later I will roam around softly singing "Tequila Sunrise" under my breath in an effort to fit in, hoping that maybe others will think I'm singing devotional hymns. If nothing else, it helps pass the time.

Later, there is a rumor going around that Amma will make an appearance to serve everyone lunch and then give a spontaneous *darshan* (blessing), or hug. Many devotees talk about Amma in a way that's reminiscent of preteen girls talking about their crushes on the more popular camp counselors, except with an element of spiritual intrigue. Supposedly you feel God's love when she hugs you and this simple gesture reassures you that there is goodness and compassion in the world. In the documentary I'd seen—i.e., some marketing material newcomers are encouraged to watch upon their arrival at the ashram—there was footage of people crying out in ecstasy after she hugs them. At this point I'd do anything to get this hug if it cures my migraine.

After a delicious lunch in the presence of the guru, we line up to get our hugs. I try to be chill but I guess I'm too excited; the anticipation is palpable and catching. When it's my turn, someone pushes my face in her chest while she holds me for maybe three seconds and whispers, "mee moo mee moo mee moo mee moo" into my ear. A handler immediately thrusts me aside and puts a hard candy in my hand.

I'm starting to think maybe spiritual enlightenment is not for me...?

Day 4

I'm surprised I've lasted this long. I've gotten used to taking ice-cold showers and sleeping with no AC in the thick muggy night air. I've made a few semblances of friendships and even signed up for a meditation class. From a mental health perspective, I love the communal living aspect that the ashram offers. I see young guys pushing Indian grannies around in their wheelchairs and children running around completely carefree

outside. I came to the ashram with the intention of staying three days and ended up staying five. Maybe I'm getting sucked into the vortex after all? However, my migraine didn't yield even one tiny bit after my Amma hug, and I wonder if it's karma getting me back for inventing a fake spiritual name. I remain unchanged and spiritually bereft.

Day 5

This is it! Last day and I'm a free bird off to Madurai for my NGO volunteer gig. I've arranged for a pre-paid taxi to meet me at the car-pool office at 12:30 in the afternoon and I arrive on the dot. I'm soon told that my taxi is at another building waiting for another passenger and she's running late. About 15 minutes later I get in the cab to find out that she has to be at the Trivandrum airport at 4 o' clock—the exact same time my train departs from Trivanduram station to Madurai. This should not have been a big deal except we were held up in traffic for at least an hour due to local election demonstrations. Our driver hurtles forward at break-neck speed to make up for lost time but as the clock ticks on, I know it's a lost cause. My fellow passenger, an older devotee from some island colonized by France (seriously, what is Amma's French marketing strategy?) pleads with him to slow down. At this point, I'm visibly angry that I'm probably going to miss the train that was so hard to purchase a ticket for in the first place, and it truly does not help that the woman keeps saying that this is Amma's doing and Amma wanted us to be here in this situation together. I hold my tongue and keep my eyes forward.

I miss the train by ten minutes.

Once I've (again) cursed India up and down for my misfortune, I book yet another train ticket for the next day and text my boyfriend asking him to please book me a room in the fanciest hotel in Trivandrum. Twenty minutes later, I roll up to the Hilton Garden Inn with my grungy rusty backpack, ready to enjoy every modern-day pleasure to the fullest extent of my hedonistic capacity. Sure, the experiment in godliness was fun but arguably not as much fun as hot water, uninterrupted WiFi access and air conditioning. Sometimes you just have to throw your hands up and say 'mee moo mee moo mee mee moo' and move on with your life.