

Marisa's Adventures in India

Part 1



Rasa Ayurveda Traditional Healing Centre for Women
Trivandrum (Thiruvananthapuram), Kerala, India

September 23 to October 17, 2008

This a journal that chronicles a life-changing experience in my life...a month in India that was more than a vacation, more than a study trip...but rather, a journey of discovery, a deepening awareness – of myself, of Ayurveda, of nature, of our impact on the world, of the human condition..all of this, and yet so much more. The following words serve as a skeleton, a rough outline that although has some depth and richness, still only skims the surface of the fullness of experience and the effect it had on my very soul...

The Cast:

Rasa Ayurveda became like a family to me, with everyone working together as a unit, thoughtfully taking care of our every need, coddling and nurturing us in ways that one rarely experiences in life, which freed us up to focus on learning and experiencing. I am so grateful to the following people, who helped make this happen:

- Niika, the founder and force behind Rasa Ayurveda; it was only through considerable grace and her determined, lovely spirit that such an amazing, traditional center of healing exists. She is pure of heart, and completely dedicated to offering a refuge of health and healing in a world which so sorely needs it...
- Sanju, Niika's adopted Indian "brother", who works side-by-side with Niika, and who tirelessly made sure we had an enriching, fulfilling experience and that our every needs were met, and then some...
- Pat, the mystery benefactor, who so generously sponsored this trip...we know little about him, except that he is an Indian living in the U.S., and that he has a generous and caring heart...I will forever feel grateful to him, and am all the more impressed by his desire to remain anonymous...clearly, he comes from a pure, ego-less place...



- Dr. Geetha, the Ayurvedic doctor who served as our primary teacher, and who also devoted herself to us heart and soul. She spent countless hours in thoughtful preparation of our classes, and taught from her heart...I learned so very much from her, on so many levels...
- Sudha, one of the Ayurvedic therapists, and who also stayed with us at Rasa each night, continuing to care for us, into the night – bringing us our medicine, hot water bottles, whatever we needed, and who seemed to have little opportunity to sleep, as she cared for us from early to late...
- Chitra, Manju, Arya...delightful, loving, beautiful – these women, along with Sudha, performed the healing treatments on us... With confident, knowing hands they massaged, kneaded, soothed and nurtured our bodies and our souls...always smiling, always asking in their charming Malayam accents, "is it OK maam?"...and indeed, it was so much more than OK...
- Jalaja and Rema...how do you say enough about people who are hard at work at 5:00 am each day, preparing delicious, fresh food for you, then serve it to you with a smile, clean up and begin lunch – which was always multi-course, the largest meal of the day...then dinner...and would be hard at work in the kitchen, absolutely nonstop, until late in the evening each night? Every meal was an incredible treat, full of healing energy, prana, love...what a gift these women were, as well as the food they so lovingly prepared...
- Vyshak, the assistant manager, who took care of endless details to ensure our comfort and the quality of our experience...he worked another full-time job as well, and yet you would never know it, as he never failed to be sweet and charming to us, and eager to be of service...
- Subhash, our competent driver, who safely ensured that we traversed the crazy roads of Kerala, and who began each journey with a stop at the Mahavishnu Temple down the street to make an offering, ensuring a safe journey...
- Rajan, the watcher, who gave us so much comfort as the one who was always on watch, making sure that no one entered who shouldn't...he cared for the grounds, watered the medicinal plants and other plants...and many other behind-the-scenes jobs such as heating our shower water in large pots over a fire in the side yard, which he brought up to us in a bucket, just as we returned from treatments, needing a shower...
- And delightful Suma, who cheerfully kept Rasa sparkingly clean...

The Other Fortunate Scholarship Recipients



There were eight of us selected to go on this scholarship trip, selected from countless applications...each woman brought to the group her own special talent and insight, an incredible group of caring, gifted healing women...

- Ronly: A recent graduate of Mount Madonna's first graduating class, she lives on Vashon Island off the coast of Seattle in the San Juan Islands. In addition to practicing Ayurveda, Ronly is a talented yoga teacher, and taught many of our morning yoga classes
- Tona: A recent graduate of CCA, Tona lives in Sun Valley, Idaho. She is in the process of trying to purchase some land, and plans to have her practice out of a yurt on her land. Tona (and Cambria) stayed at Rasa after the rest of us left to receive healing treatments before returning home
- Christina (aka Tulsi): A recent graduate of Bastyr University, Tulsi got a degree in herbology. Due to her love of plants (and the fact that her favorite herb is Tulsi), we dubbed her the nickname "Tulsi" (Tulsi is a member of the basil family, and means "holy basil")
- Amy: Amy lives in Seattle, and graduated from Kerala Academy, where she also practices cranial sacral therapy
- Yuko: Yuko is from Tokyo, and recently attended the Rocky Mountain Institute in Colorado in order to deepen her knowledge, as she is already a yoga teacher practicing in Tokyo (where the average cost of a yoga class is \$30!).
- Jessica: Jessica recently obtained her degree in Naturopathic medicine, and offered a wonderfully well-rounded perspective to our discussions, as she had much schooling to draw upon
- Anurada: Anurada recently graduated from the Ayurvedic Institute, and is half Indian. She attended boarding school in India as a teenager, and helped us to have a better understanding of customs, foods, etc.
- Cambria: Cambria was actually not one of the original eight awarded this scholarship trip, but was travelling alone around the world, desperately in need of healing as well as female companionship. She emailed Niika of this need, and we had room for one more, so Niika invited her to join us and to stay afterwards for healing treatments. Cambria was a great addition to our group, and fit in with us perfectly.

And so, the journey begins...

India, as it turns out, is half way around the world (that is, if you live in California). No big surprise to those of us who are up on geography, but it's only words until one embarks upon a plane trip that lasts, including layovers, about 48 hours...it seemed the plane flew endlessly without stopping...it was unreal how long it took to get there. I had an eight hour layover in Singapore on the way, and took advantage of this time by taking a free shuttle bus into the city and walking around for several hours. I was only vaguely impressed with the city which seemed to me to be primarily devoted to consumerism – to go to Singapore means to go shopping. There are malls literally everywhere, full of designer stores, expensive, fancy, and completely uninteresting to me. I went in search of the "gritty" part of town, where I could find something real, or historic, and at least not all about materialism; I stumbled upon the old river front area, which is historic and full of interesting shops and restaurants. Here I

spent a couple of hours, until finding my way back to the airport. Upon leaving Singapore, we also made a stop in Tai Pei, and the airport was quite impressive – I was intrigued by this brief dip into China.

The time difference in India is 12-1/2 hours ahead of our time here, and it took my body a few days to sort that out...so the first few days were spent in sort of a bleary-eyed stupor, as I absorbed and embraced this foreign land, and became utterly enchanted by it... Below, are some highlights from those first few days, days in which I felt as if I were in a lovely dream... *but then again, the whole trip felt like a lovely dream...*

Upon my arrival at the Trivandrum airport in the late evening of September 23 (about 10:00 pm), I was instantly struck by the warm, moist air, which enveloped me the moment the airplane door opened...then the beautiful, dark skinned people caught my attention...then the dinginess of the airport, which actually made me smile, as somehow it fulfilled my expectations... Anurada and Yoko were on the same plane out of Singapore, so we all arrived at the same time...Shubash and Vyshak were there to meet us, holding boards with our names on them, and we greeted each other, then piled ourselves and all our luggage into the car and headed to Rasa Ayurveda... It was late, so the streets were deserted, but they were narrow, and winding, and from what I could tell in the dark, it looked very much like the streets of Mexico, with an intriguing Indian twist...I was exhausted, yet full of excitement, enjoying the thrill of being in a new land, and I eagerly awaited discovering it...

After about a half-hour ride, we pulled up in front of Rasa Ayurveda, which is located in a two-story house in a quiet neighborhood, with a large gate across the driveway...we arrived at about 11:00 pm, and Niika was waiting for us... Upon entering the front door, there is a fairly large room with a dining table, which is where all our meals were taken. Off of this room is the kitchen, and to the side of the kitchen is a side yard with an outdoor work area where cooking and heating of water occurs over small fires... We were escorted to our rooms, and I instantly fell in love with mine.



It was located upstairs, adjacent to the main meeting room where we gathered, held yoga classes, etc. It had a spectacular view of the sprawling jungle yard, which was a constant source of pleasure for me. The room was simple, with a wooden bed upon which was a modestly thin but quite comfortable pad, a small desk and chair, an armoire, and a night stand. Pretty much everything is made by hand in India, and Niika had all the furniture made in the house. As she put it, she actually purchased the *trees* (acacia) and hired someone to make the furniture to her specifications. It was quite beautiful furniture – elegant in its simple functionality. My bed was a wooden platform, upon which sat a moderately thin but quite comfortable pad. The sheets were dyed by hand, from local herbs. I also had a small desk and chair, night stand, and armoire for my clothes. A wooden door opened on to my private bathroom, which was absolutely perfect for me. A small sink, then steps leading up to a “squat” toilet. Tile floors and a low faucet. Rarely does one find hot running water in India (at least not in Kerala, not sure about elsewhere in India). A large

bucket of hot water was waiting for me, and Niika explained how showering works, and which I came to thoroughly enjoy; a spare bucket is always kept in the bathroom, into which one puts some cool water from the faucet. A plastic scoop is used to add hot water from the hot water bucket until the desired temperature is reached. The scoop is then used to pour water over oneself, onto the floor below, where it drains out a drain hole. So simple, and it worked beautifully. (After all the healing treatments I received, I was provided hot water. The rest of the time, and always at the end of each hot, sticky day, I took a refreshingly cool shower using water poured from the tap into the bucket before climbing into bed.)

Every night while at Rasa, and indeed beginning that very first night, I lay in bed, listening to the night sounds, eagerly anticipating the next day, as a child anticipates Christmas morning. Each morning, I was awakened early by the sounds of chanting from a nearby temple, and the Rasa staff beginning the daily preparations of cooking, filling buckets for various purposes, etc. I relished these sounds of life, and felt so soothed by them...

In the main house at Rasa, there were a total of five rooms similar to mine, and Niika also rented another house across the street with additional rooms, where some of the women



stayed. The main house was located in a wonderfully special location, with a huge amount of land surrounding it in which were hundreds of coconut and banana trees, medicinal plants growing wild in abundance, and additional medicinal plants in pots, which were marked for identification. Two huts were in the yard, one which we used for making medicines, and the other is where some of our classes were held. From several of the coconut trees, colorful hammocks were hung, which served as a perfect place to relax and rejuvenate. Clothes were always

hanging from clothes lines, also attached to coconut trees, and small ponds of water meandered through the yard. An enchanting scene of tranquility and beauty, which delighted me each day...

From the second floor, stairs lead to the roof, and the roof was a magical place, for this is where the Ayurvedic treatments took place. At one point in time, this had undoubtedly been an open-air rooftop, and still held the feel of that. However, it had been enclosed with walls and roof of palm fronds, with a section across the middle of each wall left open as windowless windows. There were two treatment rooms with a wooden massage table in each, and another room used for steam treatments (svedana). For svedana, there was what looked sort of like a very large basket which hinged in the middle from bottom to top. Inside sat a tall chair. At the top of the "basket" was a hole. During svedana, one sat upon the chair with your head sticking out of the hole, and herbalized steam was infused into the "basket". It's so interesting how even in the warm heat of the weather here, the steam felt so cleansing and invigorating. I always enjoyed it, and never felt overheated by it, but simply cleansed...

I slept well every night of my trip, beginning with that first night. In the morning, I had my intake with Dr. Geetha at 9:00 am, and immediately afterwards was whisked upstairs for my first treatment. Arya and Manju began by seating me in a chair and giving me a long, soothing head massage. Then I climbed upon the table, where the two of them massaged me in perfect synchronicity, using handmade herbalized oils. One of my favorite moments on this entire, life-changing trip was this very moment... Here I was in Kerala, the birthplace of Ayurveda...in a palm-frond lined room...receiving two-person abhyanga by lovely, talented Indian women...in the distance, I heard chanting from the nearby temple...birds calling from the trees...the rich smell of the herbalized oils... As my body released the stress of travel, I allowed myself to be fully transported into this new reality, and to be transformed by it...I began to cry, tears of pure joy...Manju and Arya asked, "is it OK, maam?" and I could only say "yes - these are tears of pure joy", for that they were, they were indeed...

The next day, I had another delicious, transformative treatment. Gradually, the other women arrived, and each introduction was joyful... On Thursday evening, we had our first official gathering as a group...we met in the meeting room, where a special puja (ceremony) had been prepared with beautiful flowers and fruits... We introduced ourselves, and spoke of the gratitude we feel, and our eagerness to dive into the experience...



Friday, September 26, 2008

This has been the most perfect day...day three of my treatments, the first full day together as a group...

I awoke early, 4:00 am, and listened to the early morning sounds... At 5:00, chanting from nearby temples began, along with quiet sounds of life at our ashram...dishes rattling, water being poured into buckets...

I arose at 5:30, and prepared for yoga. I felt light, refreshed, eager to begin the day...



Yoga began at 6:00 and continued to 6:50...a gentle class, lead by Niika. From 6:50 to 7:00, we cleansed ourselves in preparation for puja (washing of the feet, hands, face and mouth). We returned for puja (devotional practice) at 7:00. It is a Devi Day (Fridays and Tuesdays are Devi Days), so we chanted together, chants to the female goddesses/devis...there were still fresh flowers adorning the altar from the previous night's opening puja, and the smell was heavenly...

Afterwards, I was given my medicine (churna in water), then breakfast. I dly's with mixed vegetables, a bit spicy, served with coconut chutney and yogurt. Also "American" breakfast, what Niika calls "dry breakfast" – small rolled oats (pan toasted), served dry with coconut milk, and a yummy variety of toppings such as dates, toasted cashews, golden raisins, almonds, date sugar. Warm, herb-infused water...

Then, an herb class, sitting outside on the veranda, taught by Dr. Gheeta. She had a variety of fresh local herbs displayed on coconut leaves...rasna, manjishta, devadharan, turmeric, amalaki, bibhitaki, haritaki, bacopa (brahmi), gotu kola (centenella asiatica). We tasted, smelled, absorbed...

Afterwards, my luscious treatment... Today I received abhyanga with handmade manjishta oil (pinda thailam), followed by shirodhara... No svedana (steam) today, as with previously...

I felt so whole, so perfect, so fresh, clean, light, energized, balanced that I just floated through the treatments, luxuriating in every moment of it, every nuance...

Back to my room, I scrubbed off the oil with green gram flour made into a paste, then showered, washed my hair, put on clean clothes, and rested while learning how to use Nikka's camera (thank you Niika! Mine broke...)...



Afterwards, lunch....more delicious homemade food, several dishes....rice, mung dahl, three different types of vegetable dishes, a spicy side dish made with pickled shatavari, incredibly wonderful...

During lunch I learned that Sanju was making medicated oil in the medicine hut in the back, so I headed outside after eating to watch and photograph...I was transported back to a simple time of living in close connection to nature...oils, ghee, herbs, decoctions of bark, cooked in a very large pot over a flame fed with coconut fronds and tree bark...under palm trees, in a jungle of green...a several hour process, to make the very oil that is used for my own abhyanga...



After this, we went out on the balcony by Dr. Gheeta's office and made coconut oil, also a several hour process...beginning with coconuts from the yard, we cracked them open with a machete (yes, I did this!), scraped out the coconut meat, placed the meat in a special spinner for awhile, added water, squeezed it by hand, strained it into a heavy brass pot, then cooked for a very long time (one + hours)...eventually, it changed color and texture, and we squeezed and strained what was left into a small jar...

beautiful, rich, golden coconut oil. It took hours to make about one cup of coconut oil!

Tired, I collapsed for awhile and read, rested. Afterwards, dinner – a light meal of a thick soup made of brown rice and dumplings, served with black sugar (perhaps molasses sugar?). Quite tasty...

Then, the oil was still not completed in the back, so we headed out to observe and ask questions of Sanju. It was now dark, perhaps 7:30, and the oil was still was not showing signs of being at just the “right” stage of readiness, a very exacting science, even though the process had begun perhaps 7 hours earlier. I was quite tired by then, so I stayed awhile and took pictures and absorbed the wonderful scene, then headed back to the house and crawled into bed, a happy smile upon my face....

Saturday, September 27, 2008

Did I say yesterday was perfect? That was only because I had yet to experience this day... I awoke at 5:00 am, awakened by the morning sounds of preparing for a new day. I lay in bed soaking it all in until 5:30, then arose and prepared for yoga at 6:00. The yoga class was conducted beautifully by Ronly. I volunteered for the “job” of making sure that we have what we need for puja each morning, so after yoga I went outside to search for some fresh flowers for the altar...which took all of about 3 minutes in this lush environment...purple blossoms of shanka pushpi, and yellow flowers I could not identify.... A sprig of Tulsi (Holy Basil)... I prepared the oil burning lamp and incense, then washed in preparation for puja. Niika conducted the puja, followed by meditation...I was transported to a tranquil, lovely place...

Breakfast was udapan (sort of a rice pancake), prepared with cashews and golden raisins, served with a mixture of warm vegetables, as well as our “dry American breakfast”. I eat some of everything, I am eating like a horse, everything is so incredibly delicious! The cooks spend hours preparing each meal, all locally grown, and it is vibrantly alive...

Afterwards, Dr. Gheeta requested that we search for examples of the herbs we’ve been learning about in her herb classes, and bring them to class...so I went in search of some Indian Sarsparilla and gotu kola... We had our herb class under the hut in the back, amongst the lushness, with a gentle breeze and birds calling, exactly as it should be...a truly wonderful class, I learned much and enjoyed it tremendously.

And then – time for my treatment, which today was a special treat; pizzichilli (pronounced “pirrichill”), something I’ve only read about and never experienced. It began with Manju placing brahmi paste on the crown of my head, wrapping my head in a banana leaf, then covering this with some white cloth, which was tied around my hairline with a strip of cloth to hold it in place.

They asked me to climb up on the special pizzichilli table, which has channels along the sides of it. This treatment



took 3 women, two to perform the pizzichilli, one to take care of the oil. There was a pot boiling over a burner near my feet, and inside this pot was a smaller one filled with the very oil that had been made for hours just the day before! Probably ½ gallon of the precious oil, liquid gold...a deep red color from the manjishta, rich and lovely with a sweet, rich fragrance. I began sitting upright, legs out, and with one therapist on each side of me, and they dipped a piece of cloth in the warm oil until it was thoroughly saturated, then drizzled the oil over every part of my body for about 45 minutes, neck, shoulders, arms, down my front, along my legs...they had me lie down, and drizzled it all over the front side of me, then I flipped over, and drizzled it all over my back side, then again sitting up...I was sort of floating in the luscious oil. The woman in charge of the oil continuously scooped up the oil as it drained towards the bottom (helped along by the two therapists, who kept scooping it towards the channel at my feet)...she would then place it in the pot to be rewarmed, and used again on me...

It was truly the most marvelous feeling, words cannot describe it...

When done, they scraped off the excess oil with leaves – long, thin, strong, deep green leaves (similar to a yucca leaf). They held one end of a leaf in each hand and scraped it along me...even this felt marvelous!

Then, shirodhara – they lead me to an adjacent palm-frond-walled “room”, which was set up and ready for me...I lay back on the table, and another type of warm, herbalized oil was gently poured in a continuous flow over my forehead for about 40 minutes...aaahhh...

Back in my room, I scrubbed off the oil with green gram flour, washed my body and hair, and dressed for lunch, which was waiting for me, and which Sanju served for me – I feel so spoiled – rice, 3 different vegetable dishes, handmade chapattis and fresh carrots and cucumbers, and the wonderful people who work here insist upon doing the serving, something I must teach my kids to do when I return home (yeah, right...). One of the vegetable dishes was made from the inside of a banana trunk, from the yard...very delicious, and also medicinal. All the meals have been medicinal, delicious and easy to digest.

Then, to my room to rest and relax and read...I got restless with resting (☺), and went in search of someone to take a walk with me (it wouldn't be proper to go on a walk alone), but no one was up for it, so I wandered around taking pictures instead, then reading in a hammock 'til dinner time...

For dinner, kitcheri! The first and last time that we'll have it, apparently, as Niika informed us all the menus are already decided upon, and they have gone to great lengths to prepare something a bit different at every meal, amazingly (16 days here x 3 meals/day! Eeek...)

We met on the front porch and discussed the spirituality of Ayurvedic healing after dinner, during which the usual evening 30-minute black-out occurred, so most of the time it was by candle light... then a quick (refreshingly cool) shower, then sleep...the end of another blissful day in Kerala!!

Sunday, September 28, 2008

Today's journal will be short, as (I fear) often will be the case, as our days are becoming increasingly full...

So, I awoke at 3:30 am, amazingly fully refreshed, and never went back to sleep! Wow, I can't imagine that at home...but, so it is here...I stayed in bed 'til 5, then dressed and prepared for puja (gathered the flowers, prepared the incense, etc.)...yoga at 6, puja at 7, breakfast at 7:30, then herb class...

Just before herb class, two men arrived to collect coconuts. They had a sort of handmade ladder, which only brought them a short distance up the trees, and from there they scurried up each coconut tree, hacking away dying fronds along with the coconuts, allowing them to fall to the ground. One of the men climbed the trees, and the other collected the coconuts, placed them in a basket, and carried the basket on his head to a central area where he dumped them for loading into their truck later. There are a LOT of coconut trees here, so they were here quite awhile, although they worked fast and expertly.



After herb class, we went shopping! Shubash took us to FabIndia (most stores are closed because it's Sunday, although along the way I noticed all the little mom-and-pop type places were open and hopping with locals!). At any rate, it's quite a posh and lovely store, fancy and probably expensive by Indian standards, but quite inexpensive by American standards. It was so wonderful to drive there, and finally see more of India! The streets were packed with cars and people, and forget about driving in a lane, cars/motorcycles/auto rickshaws just squeeze in where they can, 3 or 4 across, whatever works! It is so lush and lovely here, and much cleaner than I imagined, although certainly poverty everywhere, side-by-side with opulence, interestingly. Anyway, the store was loads of fun (Yuko, Tano, Jessica, Amy and I went), I bought a few articles of Indian-style clothing, as I need to "blend in" more here...



Then - back to Rasa Ayurveda, I scarfed down my lunch quickly, and immediately afterwards it was time for my treatments - another wonderful round of pizzichili and shirodhara....Ahhhh.....

Dinner was amazing! When I went downstairs to eat, at each place was a large ring made of banana leaves, on top of which was a large, flat banana leaf. Also, there were small "cups"

formed of banana leaves – our dishes for the evening meal, which was a delicious mung bean soup with a wonderful spiced churna to sprinkle on top. It was a very lively meal, everyone laughed and had a great time.



Afterwards, we had a cooking class – we made idli's and cococut chutney. It was great. We all huddled in the kitchen, and they had everything already set up for us. About the time we started, the electricity went out for ½ hour, as usual – so we had our cooking class by candlelight and flashlight. It was totally wonderful, and a great way to end another amazing day in Kerala....

Monday, September 29, 2008

For the first time, I did not awaken until my alarm went off at 5:30 – the best night sleep I've had, I slept deep and long...

As usual, the day began with yoga/puja/meditation/delicious homemade breakfast, then herb class...

I immediately after herb class, a group of us accompanied Nikka on a few "errands" – namely, going to a bank (nothing like a bank at home!), then to a fabric store in the heart of town. We had all agreed that while here we would each have a saree (sari) made, so went to the fabric store to select our fabric. Oh my gosh – this was the most amazing store, there was fabric of every color and description as far as the eye could see – it was a large, winding, meandering store with fabric from floor to ceiling, and dozens of people behind each counter, helping...it was overwhelming to even know where to begin, but we had little time so we just sort of dove in. I bought some lovely fabric that is green/lavender and brocaded with gold...it takes 6 or 8 or 14 (who knows??) yards of fabric for a saree (that's how it's spelled here), and the total was \$12...there is a tailor who lives 2 doors from Rasa Ayurveda, who will make the sarees for us, for \$2.00 each...so the total bill for a beautiful handmade saree with be \$14!! We are all going to wear them...on our last night here, perhaps other times while here as well, such as visiting temples...

Once again, right after returning from this outing it was time for a quick lunch, then my treatments – again pizzichilli and shirodhara, although sadly the last time for these treatments, as I will begin with new treatments tomorrow...

After treatments, I read/studied/researched/discussed what to do with my time after I leave here (which, thankfully, still feels like a long time from now, I'm in no rush, enjoying every moment!) – and ended up making a reservation at Kerala Bamboo House, in Verkala (recommended by Amy). I found pictures of it online, and it looks so lovely, on cliffs above the beach – and before coming here, I had dreamed a number of times that I stayed in a bamboo hut while here, so when I learned of this, I knew I needed to stay there! From there I can take day trips to many wonderful places...so excited about this!!

At dinner tonight, I could hardly eat (wow, that's a change!) – I think I'm just all full of snigda (Sanskrit for oil)...

I'm learning loads of Sanskrit, as Dr. Gheeta's classes are largely in Sanskrit, so I've been forced to learn it fast – which has been quite challenging, and has caused the classes to be quite hard...complicated by the fact that she also uses the Malayam words (the language of Kerala), so now I find myself needing to know the American names of plants, the botanical name, the Sanskrit name, and the Malayam name... But, it's finally beginning to sink in and make sense, and I'm learning loads each day. Dr. Gheeta is quite serious about the classes – she puts a lot into preparing each class for us, with examples of each plant, and much research. We're going to be quizzed at the end of our stay here on the medicines, and also we are each doing sort of a "research" project – writing a monograph on an herb, to be presented and shared with the class! I chose shatavari, which grows in the front yard, and Dr. Gheeta said "yes, that's good, but also do guduchi" – so she wants me to do two (am I forever being slotted as the overachiever in class?)...anyway, it's all good by me...



And then – after dinner – a concert! Sanju had arranged for some musicians to come play for us, and at the last minute they could not make it, so somehow he came up with another group of three performers, and they were incredible! They played in the yoga/meeting room, which is right outside my room...there was a violinist, and two percussionists – one playing a long drum, the other a clay pot – and they really got down! They had been playing together since childhood, and it certainly showed, they were in

beautiful synchronicity...they played a style of traditional Kerala music called Karnatic (or Carnatic) ...and it was such an amazing way to end one more amazing day in paradise....

Tuesday, September 30, 2008

Hmmm....I guess the days are starting to blend together...it's now Wednesday night, and I'm trying to remember yesterday...I do know it was wonderful, and relaxing, and peaceful...and also, that I began a new treatment....pinda sveda.

Pinda sveda involves the use of pouches (called boluses), filled with a mixture of rice, milk, and a decoction of herbs including bala...there were three therapists working on me again, two performing the treatments and the other keeping the boluses continuously warm...

They began with massaging me with a new form of herbalized oil, mukuti thailam....really smelled wonderful...then they each grabbed a warm/hot bolus and sort of

pounded/tapped/rubbed me with them. There were 4 boluses, so as two were used, two were warming, so the boluses were always warm..as they worked, they also sort of squeezed the boluses onto me, and out came a mixture that was very much like pink pancake batter, which they kept rubbing/pounding/tapping into me, from head to toe, until I was covered in this gooey pancake batter....all that was missing was the syrup!...this is a cooling procedure, so I began to get quite cool, in a pleasant sort of way, then warm with each fresh bolus, then cool again..a remarkable treatment, quite different than anything I've ever experienced.

I also had some time to sort of "putter around", which was quite nice...I did some laundry, in a bucket in my bathroom, and hung them to dry with some string that I tied from towel rack to shower head (finally, a use for the shower head, which does not work as a shower!). I felt very homey, just sort of doing a bit of this and that, in my cozy little room...

I also worked on my herbal monograph, and completed most of the one for guduchi...it took awhile (perhaps 1-1/2) hours, whew, glad to have it done, not terribly eager to do another on shatavari, as Dr. Gheetha asked....hmmm....do I risk disappointing my enthusiastic mentor?? Not sure what I'll do....

After dinner, we discussed temple etiquette, because tomorrow morning we're going to visit our first temple! Yay!! At 6:00 am, of course... (which is at least an hour or two after many of the people who work here are up and preparing for the day, creating wonderful experiences just for us...)...

Wednesday, October 01, 2008

I awoke nice and early, and prepared for a trip to the temple. I wore a churidar, with scarf, which is quite a lovely (and comfortable) thing to wear...we met in the front, then strolled down the street to the Shiva temple, in the early morning light...when we arrived, we discovered that it was not open for some reason, but no worries, there are temples on practically every corner, so we just strolled back towards the house and beyond it in the opposite direction for a short way, to the Mahavishnu Temple, which was open, although it is being expanded, so a bit under construction...ah well, it was still a wonderful experience...we prayed to the deities, walked around each shrine three times as is appropriate...sadly, as we approached one of the shrines, we heard a loud crash, and out of a tall palm tree tumbled a baby coati, which landed hard on a thin wire, right next to us...I think it was quite hurt, as it then fell to the ground, and although was still moving, I'm not sure it will survive...it has remained on my mind, the sweet little creature...☹...

At any rate, they gave us praschat (an offering back to us, for we also each made a small offering of money), which was bananas rolled in coconut and rock sugar...

Afterwards, our regular morning routine of yoga, puja, meditation, breakfast, then herb class. Immediately after class, three of us (Yuko, Amy and I) hopped in a car that we had pre-arranged to take us shopping...a very fun outing! The driver took us to 3 stores, and waited around as we shopped at each place. We were gone for close to 4 hours, and the total cost was only about \$10, so even with tip it cost less than \$5.00 each, amazingly cheap! Anyway, we

went to Paratha's, a huge department store. What I'm learning is that most of the department stores are full of fabric, I think they had 3 floors of just fabric, to be used for various purposes...you select your fabric, and tailors work cheaply, so basically everyone just has their clothes custom made for them, which seems like such a wonderful luxury! I bought something lovely there for little Miss Maya ☺ (shhh, don't tell...), then we wanted to head to a sort of "nic nac" store, but the driver, who spoke almost no English, said it was closed because it was a holiday, so he took us somewhere else....and wow, this was a totally posh store for the rich and famous, an incredible store full of wonderful things that were way out of our price range, but they did serve us a delicious cup of tea served in china, which we sipped, feeling quite elegant, and then as politely as possible excused ourselves from the store...afterwards, the driver took us to another store, SMSM (which we affectionately call the S & M store, of course), which was so awesome, it was full of everything Indian at totally cheap prices, so I was able to buy a number of gifts, which was so nice.

Meanwhile, Aunt Rosie (as Jerry affectionately calls her) decided this was a good time to arrive (no surprise, as all the other women here are also menstruating), so unfortunately, no treatment for me today...but I rested, which was nice, and studied plants....After dinner, we had another cooking class, this time we made masala dosas, then watched a movie (well, about ½ a movie then it got late and we passed out) - "Ayurveda: The Art of Living", which I've seen before but find amazing. There is no tv here, so we watched it on Niika's laptop..and so ended another wonderful day!!

Thursday, October 2

A lovely day of puttering and studying, learning and experiencing, taking in wisdom and allowing it to permeate into my soul...

I was not able to do pinda sveda today, since I'm on my period (during menses, it's best to just allow the body to flow with its own cleansing process and not disturb it), which is fine, because what I received instead was a wonderful facial massage, followed by a foot massage...

This evening, we had another mind-blowingly cool experience...an evening at the Mahavishnu Temple. We strolled up there before dinner, expecting to be back shortly, but events kept happening, and we were gone 2-1/2 hours! It began with the usual offering of devotion to each of the deities, and we arrived just in time for dipaka ratana (honoring of the deities)...people were lined up in front of the first shrine, the one to Mahavishnu, so we dutifully did the same, and waited for awhile in the heat, under a bamboo canopy, everyone's eyes looking expectantly towards the closed door of the small shrine...



...finally, we heard ringing of bells, the doors opened, and there were hundreds of candles and puja lamps all around the deity...a young man was inside the small space, and he rang a bell with one hand while smudging the deity with smoky fire with the other, and did this several times, with several different lamps. Meanwhile, others were ringing very large

bells...it was quite a spectacle, quite a cacophony! Then, the young man handed an elderly woman one of the lamps, and she walked through the crowd with it, so that each of us could fan the smoke upon ourselves...we then walked to 3 other deities, and repeated various versions of the same ceremony, ending at the naagas (snake deities), which was nestled deep in the jungle, in a tangle of roots and branches from a banyon tree which towered overhead, through an canopy of ivy-like plants...and in a burst of clarity, it became quite apparent that I just was not in Kansas anymore!!

So, then, as if that wasn't enough, everyone gathered on the ground in the front of the temple, with us near the front...everyone sat on bamboo mats upon the cement, and two small microphones appeared along with musical instruments including symbols (which several people used), a shruti (played by a young adolescent girl), and a tambourine...and then...kirtan, which is call-and-response chanting. It began with an elderly woman chanting, and us responding...you could tell she'd been doing this her whole life, it flowed out of her so naturally...then, a charming older man, who was next to me, took over, and he played his tambourine very expertly, rhythmically, swaying and getting lost in the chant...he was dressed in an orange lunghi (the traditional form of clothing for men in Kerala, sort of a long wrap-around "skirt" that can also be worn at knee level), with no shirt, a necklace of large pods of some sort, and nothing else...he looked so tribal, so unlike anyone walking the streets of Chino Hills, that's for sure! He then turned to me, and spoke rapidly in Malayam (the language of Kerala), while gesturing and smiling broadly from ear to ear, a sparkle in his eye...our group looked at each other, no idea what he was saying...then, he pushed the microphone towards us, gesturing that it was our turn...I have to admit I had already been sweating from the heat, but with this, I began to sweat even more! (although, on a side note, during puja the other day, many of us were saying how we love to sing but don't have good singing voices, to which Niika replied..."my guru told me that if you don't have a good singing voice, you should sing even louder so that God can hear what he gave you!)...so this came to mind, and, well, I still couldn't bring myself to sing very loudly...but, thankfully, Niika has a beautiful voice (and she used to perform with a group, doing Kirtan as opening acts on large stages for well known Indian performers)... and quite fortunately we had, just that morning, learned a chant:

*Sree Krishna Govinda
Hare Murare
Hey Natha Narayana Vasudeva*

So, Niika looked at me, as she at first blocked out the chant, so I sort of prodded her, and she began the lovely chant...we followed suit, as we had been taught, in our so-so voices, but the effect must have been impressive nevertheless to the barefoot, lunghi-and-saree-wearing, mahogany-skinned, Malayan-speaking Hindus, this group of 7 white woman (and one Japanese)...so our little "audience" was intrigued, watching our every move...it was an amazing, wonderful experience...they wanted more, so we chanted the old standby "*Om Namaya Shivaya*"... and then they wanted more, but we had exhausted our repertoire, and said we will come back next week (with much practicing in the meantime!)...afterwards, as we were taking pictures with the charming tambourine player (and, I must admit, I sneaked a few pics during the chanting, thanks Jerry for teaching me how to shoot from the hip, in this case from my lap ☺)...an Indian man walked up, who spoke fairly good English (a rarity here), and said "you

know the Devi Temple?" – this addressed to Niika, who said "uh...no...", to which he replied, "it is just there, and we wish you to come tomorrow, tomorrow is Devi day, please come, our temple has some troubles, we need you to sing for us, so tomorrow night, you come," so we apparently had been catapulted into sort of rock-star status, in high demand as it turns out. However, Niika responded with "Oh, I'm so sorry, this is such an honor, but we have a doctor coming tomorrow night to teach us" – and he tried to find a time, offering numerous suggestions, and ended up giving his mobile number...so, we shall see what happens with that!

Friday, October 3, 2008

Wow, there is so much going on each day, I don't know if I can keep up with this journal, but I really want to, so I will try...however, this journal is really just sort of an outline of my days, there is so much more, so much just within the nuances of life here, the people, the smells, the feel, the complete wonderful foreignness of it, I feel like I'm in such a far-away land, with people who live lives so different from us in the good 'ol USA, that it stirs up and challenges my vision of life, of people, and enhances it ~ bringing fresh perspective, new light, expanded vision...such a gift this is...and yet, it feels so natural, so comfortable, so familiar...

Today began, as before...with healing, soothing, grounding practices that ease me into each day, as if sliding into satin sheets, or a warm bath...After the morning practices, we had class.



Dr. Geetha is such a dear, and goes the extra mile to give us as much information as she can, she wants us to leave here with a real sense of the medicinal herbs and healing therapies. When we arrived in class, she had spread on the floor a cloth bordered in gold, and upon it, numerous small pieces of banana leaf. Each piece of leaf contained an herb that we have studied. Today was a review day, and she began with me (lucky me!) and asked me to identify all the herbs...gulp...I did fairly well, with a few slips....then we each did this, until we could all

recognize them easily. We then discussed what each are used for, etc. It's so incredible to get to see/smell/taste/touch the herbs in this way, not as a powder in a bag, but a leaf, a root, a flower, a bush, a tree...I feel like kids must feel when they first learn that milk doesn't come from cartons, but from cows ☺...

Then, a car arrived to whisk Tulsi and I ...we had an appointment to see a Jyotisha, which is a Vedic Astrologer. What an experience this was...he is on the other side of town, so the drive alone was amazing and fun. His office was up a flight of steps, then a non-descript, simple waiting room...Tulsi went first, then me. His office was lined floor-to-ceiling (and most everywhere in between) with books, books, books, and his desk was in front of an open window, with palm trees beyond and a gentle breeze. He was an older man, but as is so strangely common here, he's simultaneously very traditional and extremely high tech...so, after gathering birth info from me, he plunked it into his computer and within seconds he knew everything about me...quite literally. It was amazing...and, he placed everything in a

larger spiritual perspective, so everything he said was imbued with a sense of the Divinity within and the Truth about who we are, separate from body and mind... He gave freely of his time, then only requested a donation...I was deeply moved...

Back to Rasa Ayurveda, and lunch...then another class. We are now going to begin learning about the healing treatments, as our studies of specific herbs is complete. So, today, we learned about shirobasti and pathrapodala svedana. Next week, we will perform these treatments on each other.

Then, time for my final treatment (oh no!!)...but oh my gosh, it was heavenly, once again...a head massage, followed by abhyanga (with my new favorite oil, Dhanwantharam Thailam), followed by a deliciously fragrant facial massage...

After my "bucket shower", which I totally love, I heard laughter downstairs, and went down to investigate...today is Cambria's birthday (one of my fellow students), and there was a bit of a surprise party for her, organized by the delightful staff here, complete with pashyam (thick sugary rice pudding, sort of...the typical treat at such occasions and quite yummy) and a gift (a bamboo boat, the sort used to cruise the backwaters here).

So then, because we just hadn't accomplished enough yet with this day, we had a special event this evening; Dr. Velayudhan Nair, the vice president of Pankajakasthuri Ayurveda Medical College, a local college of Ayurveda, was a guest speaker. He specializes in dravya guna, skin diseases, and works to preserve indigenous plants from extinction. His talk was fascinating, full of folk lore as well as modern-day wisdom, and he talked at length about the demise of healing plants and what to do about it. Tomorrow, we will be visiting him at his college, and will learn more.

The day finished with Niika reading us a story from a children's book: "Hanuman's Journey to the Medicine Mountain", since we will be visiting Medicine Mountain in a few days (and a children's story is just about our speed)...followed by a song that she taught us, and we all sang together:

"So it's goodnight, sweet sisters
It's time to take your rest

Won't you lay your head down
On my feathered bed

'Cuz I love you
And the angels love you too

So I wish you goodnight, goodnight, goodnight."

(How can one not sleep sweetly after a day like this??..)

N A M A S K A R A M

(In Kerala, "Namaskaram" is used instead of the more common "Namaste")

