

**Sabbatical Leave Proposal**

Name: Paul Young

Title: Associate Professor of Graphic Design

Department: Fine & Applied Arts

Draft #2: October 27, 2009

**Proposal Summary**

I came to teaching late in my career as a professional graphic designer. At Parkland, I have learned a great deal about teaching and how to communicate better with a diverse audience. Although I love to teach, the act of teaching takes an enormous amount of energy. This is especially true when the subject is an artistic and creative endeavor such as graphic design.

After ten years of full-time teaching, I feel it is time for personal renewal. My sabbatical proposal focuses on both professional development and personal growth. Upon return, I hope to do what I love to do with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

I am requesting sabbatical leave for one semester (either Fall 2010 or Spring 2011).

Thank you for your consideration,

Signature of Department Chair

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Applicant

Date

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## **Responsibilities at Parkland**

I teach graphic design and web design courses in the Fine & Applied Arts department. I also offer seminars at the Business Development Center on a regular basis. In the past, I have taught 3D animation courses for the CSIT department.

In addition to my teaching responsibilities, I am also a tireless promoter of Parkland's Graphic Design Program. I have brought influential designers as guest speakers to campus, enriched our students' lives with special events and out-of-town field trips, gave presentations, curated/juried/judged art exhibitions, and more.

Beyond my teaching responsibilities, the largest project I have undertaken at Parkland is the design and maintenance of the Graphic Design Program Web Site. Online since 2002, this site has gone through at least three major revisions. The latest edition serves two purposes: it promotes our program and it also delivers our course material. This site is rich with resources, allowing students and recent graduates access to references, tutorials, best practices guidelines and much more. Maintaining and updating a site with hundreds of pages is labor-intensive and time consuming. You can view the web site at <http://gds.parkland.edu/>.

Ever since my appointment as a full time instructor, I have worked closely with our library director updating our graphic design collection. I have served on search committees, offered sessions at the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, taught for College for Kids and participated in summer workshops for middle school girls. I have also participated in two international exchange programs. Additional information about my activities is linked from my personal home page at <http://virtual.parkland.edulpyoung/>.

## **Eligibility for Sabbatical**

I have been a full time faculty member since August 1999. I have never received sabbatical leave. I applied for sabbatical leave in 2007 and 2008, but my proposals were not accepted.

## **Goals for the Sabbatical**

I teach because I love to share my knowledge and experiences. In order to teach well, one needs to have energy and enthusiasm. In order to teach graphic design well, one needs to be inspired and inspire others to be more creative. During the sabbatical, my goals are to recharge my batteries and renew my creative energies so that I can come back inspired to take my students to new heights.

During the sabbatical, I want to expand my potential for personal growth as an individual as well as a professional. The only way to achieve this is to take a break from the cyclical routine of the academic semesters in order to gain new experiences.

Personal growth and renewal are especially important for creative individuals who need to draw inspiration from both the world around them as well as their inner self. As I raise the creative standards of my own work, my students' work and the reputation of Parkland's graphic design program are also raised, thereby drawing more potential students to Parkland College.

### **Specific Activities Planned for the Sabbatical**

My planned activities will focus on strategies to boost my creativity and my design skills in order to achieve my goals. If my sabbatical proposal is accepted, I will design a service learning project for myself by volunteering my design services to a non-profit service organization who is in need of a new web site. This is in alignment with Parkland's service learning initiatives of the past several years and my actions can serve as a model for my students.

By volunteering my services to a non-profit organization, I hope to be able to help solve some of their marketing communication needs with a dynamic and creative web site design. Many nonprofits do not have the budget to hire professionals to design their web sites. As a result, their current site may be poorly organized and lacking in visual integrity. By offering my services and creativity, I will be volunteering my time for a good cause, learning new skills and gaining personal satisfaction at the same time.

Although I have over 20 years of print design experience, web design is a relatively new endeavor for me. There are many technical issues about web design that I have yet to master, so this project will allow me to gain new design skills as it relates to navigation design, web usability guidelines, information architecture, and advanced web development issues like using CSS (cascading style sheets) for visual layout. As the marketing communications industry grows, there will be more need for graphic designers to have web design skills. I would like to master these skills so that I can bring them into the classroom.

Throughout my career, I have always learned the most by taking a hands-on approach with realworld projects. I have been self-taught most of my life and I intend to approach this project in the same manner. There are plenty of Internet resources and books on the topic of web design and I will consult these resources as needed. I also have a personal network of industry professionals I can consult with if necessary.

I will use the following criteria when selecting a non-profit organization to volunteer my time with:

- personal alignment with the organization's mission statement and objectives
- organization has a real and timely need to promote or educate on the web
- organization's current web presence is lacking in professionalism and/or creativity
- organization's stake holders are aware of and respect the power of good design and visual communication
- organization's stake holders are accessible and communicate well

Examples of non-profit organizations I might choose to volunteer with include:

- The Reading Group
- Champaign County CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate)
- University YMCA .
- Station Theatre
- Eastern Illinois Food Bank

The timeline for this project might look something like this:

- Week 1-4: Research and contact non-profit organizations, meet with stakeholders to discuss objectives and needs
- Week 5-8: Design site architecture, screen mock-ups, templates
- Week 9-12: Develop pages, publish and troubleshoot technical issues
- Week 13-16: Train webmaster, receive feedback from client, reflect on sabbatical

### **Justification for Sabbatical**

I have worked at Parkland College for over ten years now. I was asked by David Jones (former FAA department chair) to redesign the Graphic Design Program from the ground up and did so with enthusiasm and energy. I recruited and recommended adjunct instructors who were hired to raise the level of professionalism in our program. I presented at two national graphic design conferences, curated a commercial art exhibition in the Art Gallery, volunteered to design promotional materials for the Art Gallery, brought important speakers to Parkland and hosted events like a movie premiere of a new documentary about graphic design. Our graduating students have reached ever higher levels of professional achievement and are now working at important firms and organizations in the local marketing communications industry (for our latest alumni update, please see <http://gds.parkland.edu/pages/alumni.html>). During my tenure at Parkland, I have also earned a masters degree in education from the University of Illinois. I now have the need to recharge my energy and my commitment so that I can return to Parkland as the best teacher I can be.

Upon my return, Parkland College will benefit by gaining a re-energized and refreshed teacher who has achieved his goals during the sabbatical leave. After reaching my goals, I will be able to:

- introduce first-hand knowledge about current standards in web design into the classroom
- demonstrate professional growth as a web designer and new media artist
- demonstrate personal growth as an individual as a result of participation in a service learning project
- draw upon new personal experiences for creativity and inspiration
- inspire others by sharing my experiences
- take my students to new heights with renewed energy
- continue my contributions to the college with renewed enthusiasm

## **Sharing the Results of the Sabbatical**

The entire sabbatical experience will be documented with a blog. Upon my return to the college, I would like the opportunity to share my sabbatical experiences with a presentation to the PCA, the Board of Trustees, to other faculty through the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, and/or anyone else who is interested.

Note: This is a copy-paste of the original blog written by Paul Young in 2011 to report his sabbatical. To view the original, see: <http://2011sabbatical.blogspot.com/>. The order of the entries has been reversed from the original blog.

## Sabbatical 2011

The sabbatical blog of Paul Young, Associate Professor of Graphic Design at Parkland College in Champaign Illinois USA.

Wednesday, July 7, 2010

### [Preparing for the Sabbatical](#)



I am an associate professor at Parkland College in Champaign IL USA. After teaching graphic design full-time for 10 years, I'm very pleased to be taking a semester off for sabbatical leave in spring 2011. My sabbatical application was approved on December 22, 2009 and we immediately starting making plans. With an extended period of time available for recuperation and renewal, my partner and I wanted to do some serious traveling. At first, we thought an around-the-world trip would be rather exciting, but both the cost and weather proved to be challenging. So we narrowed our choices down to destinations where the weather was good and our dollars could be stretched as much as possible. After consulting with a travel agent who specialized in multi-destination fares ([www.justfares.com](http://www.justfares.com)), we ended up with an itinerary that included Bangkok, Kolkata, Darjeeling, Singapore, Bali and Tokyo. Because we wanted

flexibility in our dates, we booked only the first and last part of our itinerary. This way, we can stay longer if we liked one particular location and leave if we didn't. We've never had the luxury to be able to travel this way, so this is particularly exciting. The best part: we leave on January 1, 2011. What a great way to start a new year!

Friday, October 15, 2010

## [Sabbatical Project](#)



Parkland College's policies state that sabbatical leave shall be granted based on the rankings of a sabbatical leave committee. Every year, faculty compete with each other by submitting proposals to the committee based on written guidelines. Since the proposals are competitive, a great deal of time and energy is spent writing and revising the proposals. In my case, I had to submit my proposal three times in three years before it was approved. In each case, the committee members had different feedback and I aligned my proposal to their priorities. In the final proposal that was accepted, I included a

professional development component in the form of a service learning project: "By volunteering my services to a non-profit organization, I hope to be able to help solve some of their marketing communication needs with a dynamic and creative web site design. Many non-profits do not have the budget to hire professionals to design their websites. By offering my services and creativity, I will be volunteering my time for a good cause, learning new skills and gaining personal satisfaction at the same time." After considering several options, I made a commitment to the University YMCA to re-design their web site because my personal priorities aligned with the organization's mission statement and objectives. For them, the timing was perfect because their national office has just rolled out a new branding initiative with a new logo. The entire design process has been recorded on this project page:

[www.electric-pictures.com/staging/ymca](http://www.electric-pictures.com/staging/ymca).

Monday, November 8, 2010

## [Preparing for Traveling](#)



Besides obtaining visas, getting vaccinations, and researching [electricity adapters](#), preparing for an extended trip takes a lot of planning and paying attention to details. For example, malaria is a problem in India and Westerners are usually not immune to the bug. Anti-malaria drugs are available, but they are not recommended to be taken for long periods of time. So we opted for industrial strength [mosquito repellent](#) and [patches](#) instead. After doing some research, we settled on repellents with [lemon eucalyptus oil](#) (the alternative would have been using a product with [DEET](#)). Getting our finances together for a

long trip also took a lot of planning. All our bills are now either paid automatically or being managed with ebills at our Bank of America online banking account. We've decided to carry very little cash with us. Instead, we've opted to carry two Capital One credit cards with zero balances because they don't charge any international transaction fees. We also have two debit cards to use at ATM machines. Lastly, I decided to splurge on a new backpack and I opted for this [Osprey model with wheels](#) plus a [matching day pack](#). But the find of the day was this very comfortable [inflatable travel pillow](#) designed for long flights in economy class.

**Wednesday, December 1, 2010**

## [Kindle vs. Kobo](#)

With prices for e-readers hovering around \$100, we decided it was time to jump in. What better excuse do we need? With lots of time for relaxation and rejuvenation on our sabbatical, it's definitely time to catch up on some reading. But who wants to lug a bunch of books all around southeast Asia? Before committing to a Kindle, I tested an iPad in bright sunlight by the pool and the reflection on the screen bothered me quite a bit. When it comes to replicating the feel of reading a real book, the iPad just didn't stack up to the Kindle. Besides, it's more than twice as heavy as a Kindle and its battery life is only 10 hours as compared to two weeks for typical Kindle users.

Since my partner and I were both in the market for e-readers, we decided that it would be fun to buy two different brands just to compare. So that's how we ended up with both a Kindle and a Kobo. For pure reading pleasure, both devices performed extremely well -- the type was sharp, the contrast was good, the screen reflection non-existent and the battery life very very long. The Kindle 3 was definitely a faster device, but the graphics and user-interface on the Kobo was more visually elegant. Typing was painful on both devices, so even though the Kindle had wireless capabilities, I didn't use it. Instead, I managed all book downloads on a laptop and synched the files to the devices the same way I would synch a computer to an iPod.

And that's where [Calibre](#) comes in. Not only does this amazing free application manage your e-book library for you, it also translates between various e-book formats seamlessly (the Kobo accepts epub files while the Kindle accepts mobi files). Amazingly, the software is free and it is well documented and supported. As a bonus, Calibre can also download hundreds of magazines and newspapers in e-book format for free (Amazon charges for the same service). The only format Calibre chokes on is PDF (but then, so do other applications that attempt to reformat PDFs into e-book formats). The only complaint I have so far is that the graphics-rich color layouts of magazines and newspapers don't translate well to the small 600x800 black-and-white screens.

**Sunday, January 2, 2011**

## [Taking Off](#)



It's New Year's Eve and it's time to take off. We decided to do a one-way car rental from Champaign to O'Hare in Chicago to solve one nagging little problem: What do you wear when it's 20°F in Illinois and 80°F in Thailand? We definitely did not want to be carrying winter coats with us for 3 months. Our other options (Amtrak, Megabus, Lex Express) would all involve freezing our asses off trying to get to our Korean Air flight. And as it turned out, the rental car option was cheaper than our other options, so we lucked out. As is our habit, we stopped by Whole Foods on the way to the

airport to pick up some tasty snacks – just to make the other passengers jealous.

The 19-hour flight from Chicago to Bangkok was uneventful. We had a 2-hour layover in Seoul and Bonnie



had the right idea: she indulged in a massage. This is the second time we've flown an Asian airline across the Pacific and both times the service was impeccable. The stewardesses looked like dolls dressed in very stylish uniforms. And their demeanor was completely different than American stewardesses. It may sound like a cliché, but these girls were softer, more subservient, more eager to please. Was this just a cultural difference or was this Korean Air's training? Korean Air also had nice little touches even for passengers in economy class: slippers and toothbrushes were provided for everyone. And the individual seat-back entertainment center had more movies than anyone would want to watch. I would definitely fly Korean Air again without hesitation.

**Wednesday, January 5, 2011**

### [3 Nights in Bangkok](#)



Bangkok is a super megapolis that is indeed the crossroads of Asia. As an international hub with thousands of international travelers from all over the world criss-crossing here, it's no surprise that Bangkok has some extreme contrasts. Bangkok has everything any big city has – pollution, traffic jams, dirty alleys with rats. But Bangkok also has some of the best food we've ever tasted and it's very, very cheap.

There is no way we could do Bangkok justice in three days, so we didn't even try. We booked the [Shambara Hostel](#) for 3 nights which was just enough time to recuperate from the long flight. The hostel was in a great neighborhood known as [Khao San Road](#) which has a bustling night market and plenty of dining options just steps from our door. Ever since watching [Anthony Bourdain's TV show](#), I've been fantasizing about Thai street food. So as soon as we got up the next day, we went out to hunt up some breakfast grub. Just by luck, we stumbled upon a little street vendor that had about 20 dishes already prepared and ready to eat at 6am. Yes, the dishes were spicier than what we're used to in the States, but it was a really flavorful and potent spicy jolt that clearly announced that we're no longer in Kansas. The next day, we discovered that within one block from our hostel was a "vegetarian alley" lined with several restaurants that specialized in healthy and organic options. Naturally, we had to indulge. And my find of the day was a street vendor selling stir-fried insects, which she seasoned with a little fish sauce and some secret spices. Yum!

For contrast, we also took a [tuk-tuk](#) to the city's premiere shopping mall, the [Siam Paragon](#). This was a super high-end mall that somehow took all of Michigan Avenue's Magnificent Mile and stuffed it into one big building. But the real reason we went to Siam Paragon was to take a peek at their famous [food court](#). In the lower level of the mall was every type of street food available in Bangkok served up in a pristine sanitary environment. The food looked fantastic, but for some reason it just didn't taste as good as the real thing. Maybe it was just my imagination, but there's something special about Bangkok's street food that just can't be duplicated in any other environment.

**Saturday, January 8, 2011**

## [Hua Hin](#)



After 3 nights in Bangkok, we were rested enough to continue our journey. We decided to venture south because we wanted to see what Thailand's famous beaches were like. Thailand's eastern gulf coast has 3 islands that are famous tourist destinations, so we decided to start with the closest one – the island of Koh Tao. To get there, we could have taken an 8-hour bus ride to the ferry, but since we had time on our hands, we decided to break the trip up into more bite-sized chunks. Because the town of Hua Hin is only 3.5 hours south of Bangkok, it made sense for us to make a pit stop there.

[Hua Hin](#) is a resort town that is the equivalent of "the Hamptons" for well-to-do Bangkok city dwellers. The town is a miniature version of Bangkok and has everything Bangkok has to offer packaged in a much more manageable size. There are 4-star hotels as well as small cheap guest houses in hidden alleys. Since we had a budget of \$100 per day, we decided to splurge a little and booked the [Araya Hotel](#). Araya turned out to be a comfy mid-range hotel within walking distance of some of the best seafood restaurants in town, an excellent night market, and lots of bars with pretty young Thai girls just hanging out looking for "action." I guess we shouldn't have been surprised to also see an unusually large number of older white men with younger Thai women walking around town as well.

Just like in Bangkok, there was an abundant selection of amazing street food to try in Hua Hin. Every night, certain streets are transformed into a giant food fest, all set up with makeshift temporary kitchens that are dismantled by midnight. In order for regular restaurants to compete, they're forced to also bring out temporary kitchens onto the street to attract passersbys. This makes for a wonderful spectacle of street theatre every night as vendors and waiters beckon you to try their unique specialty. After 2 nights of overeating and indulgence, it was time to head for the ferry to Koh Tao.

**Thursday, January 13, 2011**

## [Koh Tao](#)



Hua Hin is a resort town for Thais. But Koh Tao is a resort island strictly for foreigners. Both destinations offer an incredible range of services, from restaurants to hotels to shopping. But the difference between Hua Hin and Koh Tao is a visible racial divide. In Hua Hin, foreigners mixed with the Thais on the streets. But in Koh Tao, almost all the tourists are European, Australian or American (there's a smattering of Japanese here as well, but they seem to only like to hang out at the [Nangyuan Island Resort](#)). So what you see as you walk around is a clear division of races – all the people being served are white and all the people doing the serving are brown. This divide is also felt in the interactions between the races. Sure, all the Thais are very friendly, but

in Hua Hin the smiles seem more genuine. In Koh Tao, it's abundantly clear that they're only interested in your money. That said, it's still amazingly cheap here even with Koh Tao's inflated prices. Typical entrees

are \$2 to \$3 at authentic road-side Thai eateries. An amazing variety of fresh seafood barbecue can be had for about \$10. Our roomy air conditioned bungalow by the beach was \$40/night but smaller ones can be had for \$20 without "aircon."

In Koh Tao, we decided to stay at a beach community called Sairee Beach mainly because of the abundant variety of accommodation choices available. As is our habit, we booked one night at a random hotel on the Internet, then walked around town to see what else might be available. Pictures on a web site don't always tell the full story and there's nothing like asking to see a room before you take it. So after shopping around and looking at several places, we discovered the AC Two Resort (not listed in the guide books and not on the Internet). It was a perfect location at a great price -- right on the beach "boardwalk" and within easy walking distance were dozens of eateries, massage parlors, travel agents, etc. But the hidden gem on the island was a [lady-boy](#) bar called the [Queen's Cabaret](#) with a nightly show of enthusiastic drag queens who lip-synch their hearts out with elaborate costume changes between sets.

After 6 nights in Koh Tao, we decided to move on. Next stop, the island of Ko Phangan.

**Sunday, January 16, 2011**

## [Koh Phangan](#)



Everyone has a fantasy of what a perfect tropical paradise might look like. For us, the fantasy turned into reality when we discovered a beach community called Thong Nai Pan on the island of Koh Phangan. Thong Nai Pan is actually two bays, each with its own community and distinct personality. There's the little bay called "Noi" and a larger bay called "Yai," which is where we decided to land. Here, the vibe is definitely lower key – there are less people around and time just seems to slow down to a crawl.

As usual, we booked one night at a random resort, then started shopping for a place we can call home. As it turned out, just a few doors down the beach from where we landed was a hidden paradise called [Dolphin Bungalows](#). Owned by an Australian woman and her Thai husband, Dolphin was unlike anything else we've seen. As soon as you enter the grounds, you're surrounded by lush tropical greenery. All their cabanas were surrounded by beautifully landscaped gardens in a jungle theme complete with ponds. We managed to snag one of their roomier cabanas for \$30 a night. This felt like home, so we decided to settle down and hang out for a while.

Dolphin sure made it hard for us to leave their grounds. Each table in their outdoor bar/restaurant area is housed in its own open-air pagoda-like cove with comfy cushions and an inviting entry way. Their menu was also very different than the same-same copycat menus of typical resort restaurants. For example, we've never seen a morning glory hash brown dish before anywhere – and it was delicious ("morning glory" is the local name for [water spinach](#) which some restaurants will list as "hollow vegetable"). There are more than enough tables for everyone and the guests typically just hang out in one of their coves as if the whole restaurant area was a communal living room.

Right outside our resort entrance was a big beautiful beach and maybe a dozen other beach resorts, each with its own restaurant. On the beach were longboat taxis ready to take us anywhere. Up the road is a

small village with tiny roadside eateries so there was a wide range of eating options to choose from. All-in-all, I think this is as close to paradise as we'll get.

**Thursday, January 20, 2011**

## [Full Moon Party](#)



Until now, I've never been to a frat party. But after attending my first [Full Moon Party](#), I can now say I have. Billed as the biggest party in the world, Koh Phangan's monthly Full Moon Party is an all-night affair that supposedly attracts up to 30,000 people in high season. It's high season now, but I doubt there were more than 10,000 people at last night's party. True, 10,000 people is nothing to sneeze at, but as far as parties go, I've been to more interesting ones in Champaign-Urbana.

The party takes place on Sunrise Beach in the town of Haad Rin, which fortunately is on the opposite side of the island from where we are staying. Party-goers from surrounding islands start arriving at dusk and by midnight, the entire beach is packed with very drunk people. Upon arrival, you are greeted with rows and rows of vendors selling "buckets" of booze – usually a pint of hard liquor and 2 or 3 kinds of mixers inside a small plastic toy pail. The concoction is mixed for you with ice and then you stick a straw into the mix and start drinking. Next, you can hire a local artist to paint your body with designs using fluorescent paint. Then you head for the beach and dance all night long to really bad DJs playing trance music. That's essentially the ritual. What makes this a frat party is that just about every party-goer is white, in their early 20s and doing exactly the same thing. No variation, no creativity, just the standard conformist follow-the-herd mindset you see on any college campus frat row. Even everyone's haircuts looked pretty much the same.

As usual, the very enterprising Thais rise up to challenge of servicing thousands of people all night long with booze, food and even emergency medical help -- all for a price. Even the taxi rates go up on party night – perhaps the extra surcharge is for putting up with the drunks all night long. So I guess I can say "I went." But if we're staying another month, I have no urge to go again.

**Thursday, January 27, 2011**

## [Good-bye Paradise](#)



Koh Phangan is a great little island and Thong Nai Pan is a great little beach resort community. So why is it that after only two weeks, we're itching to leave this perfect tropical "paradise"?

Could it be the heavy humidity and the constant dampness? Could it be the aggressively hungry mosquitoes hiding in the beautifully landscaped grounds of our cottage? Or the sand flies feasting on us as we tried to dine on the sand at beach restaurants? Could it be that we got tired of drinking Chang beer (and we haven't been able to get our hands on a Guinness

since we left Bangkok weeks ago)? Or maybe it's because we've tried all the restaurants in the area worth eating at and got tired of ordering the same things over and over?

Whatever the reason, it was definitely time to move on. Like Europe, Asia has a ton of low-cost airlines flying all over the place, so we booked a flight to Chiang Mai with [Nok Air](#) for about \$180 the day before we decided to leave. When we changed planes in Bangkok, we noticed another change: almost all the foreign tourists disappeared. This was a good sign. I think we're back in Thailand again.

## Sunday, February 6, 2011

### [Chiang Mai](#)



Bangkok was a little too crazy. Koh Phangan was a little too quiet. For us, Chiang Mai was just right -- small enough to walk around in, yet large enough to have the cultural vibe that makes a destination interesting. We arrived in Chiang Mai late on a Thursday night and checked into the Eurana Boutique Hotel -- chosen for its central location and its heavily discounted rooms on Expedia. The next day was spent shopping for a more permanent home in the same neighborhood. We saw guesthouses with rooms from \$6 to \$60 per night and eventually settled on [Yindee Guesthouse](#). At \$30 a night, Yindee was a great value -- a nice balance between comfort and style (they even provided a communal refrigerator, a microwave and eating utensils for their guests). And it looks like we arrived in Chiang Mai at just the right time. During our stay, there were two festive events happening almost simultaneously -- the Chinese New Year celebration and the annual Flower Festival. The weather has been perfect -- low humidity, high in the 80s during the day and low in the 60s at night, and mostly sunny just about every day.

Founded in 1296, Chiang Mai was originally a walled city (remains of the old wall are still visible in several spots around the perimeter of the old city). Our guesthouse is located in the [farang](#) ghetto, which is in the northeast part of the old walled city. Our neighborhood was a perfect starting point to explore Chiang Mai -- within a few blocks of our guesthouse was a local market surrounded by tons of street vendors. Around the corner was an Irish pub, a Japanese restaurant, and a vegetarian restaurant. Like all tourist corridors in Thailand, our neighborhood had plenty of services including an abundance of the three Ts -- tours, tattoos, and Thai massage.

Yes, Chiang Mai is a tourist destination, but it's a tourist destination for Thais as well as foreigners. Although you see plenty of farangs walking around, foreigners are definitely in the minority here. When shopping at the famous Night Bazaar or the Sunday Walking Street, there were more Thai customers than foreigners. While we were here, we took a bicycle tour through the country-side south of the city and I indulged in a vegetarian Thai cooking course. But the highlight of our stay had to be a day trip to the [Elephant Nature Park](#). Founded by Sangduen Chailert (a.k.a. "Lek"), this park rescues circus and working elephants who have suffered abuse and unbelievable hardships all of their lives. At the park, there are no elephant rides or performing elephants -- just happy elephants living in adopted family groups and not being forced to do tricks or hard labor. In fact, the park is not fenced in -- the elephants can leave any time they want to. But they don't because for them, this is indeed elephant heaven.

Chiang Mai is not perfect. The traffic is pretty heavy and the petrol fumes can be rather irritating. And on certain streets, there is a distinct and persistent sewer odor. But all-in-all, this was the best destination on our trip so far.

**Monday, February 7, 2011**

## Thailand Epilogue



It's been over a month since we've arrived in Thailand, so it's time to move on. But before we take off for India, I thought I'd note a few random thoughts about this amazing country.

Without a doubt, Thailand is very friendly to [farangs](#). All the Thais we met were genuinely welcoming, helpful and honest. Many of those serving the tourists were obviously very poor, but they seemed happy and content with life despite working very long hours for very little profit. With the exception of a few lepers, there were surprisingly few beggars on the streets. Street vendors rarely harassed us. When bartering, once a price was agreed upon, it was firm. No one wanted to cheat us and when the change was returned from a sale, it was always accurate. In fact, at least twice I was called back because I had walked off without getting all my money back. We quickly built up a mutual trust with the Thais. For example, when dropping off laundry, no receipt was given and none was expected. Somehow, they always remember your face and hand back the correct laundry bag every time.

Just about everyone speaks a little English, but whenever I ask where they learned the language, the answer is always "from tourists." And since English-speakers from around the world have a wide range of accents, I'm sure those English lessons did not happen in ideal circumstances (just imagine trying to learn English from a native German speaker). And since English is not the only foreign tongue spoken by tourists in Thailand, some Thais have picked up a few other languages as well. In one instance, a Thai waitress at an Italian restaurant took my order in English and without blinking, took the order at the next table in Italian.

There were, of course, a few surprises. For one, the Thais don't eat with chopsticks. Unlike other neighboring Asian countries, they use forks and spoons just like the Europeans do. The exception is when they think you're Japanese – then they bring out the chopsticks just for you.

The other big surprise was the Thai's acceptance of [lady-boys](#) in their society. In our culture, if a man wore a dress and make-up to work, there would be hell to pay. But in Thailand, we saw lady-boys working as receptionists and hostesses (if you owned a restaurant, why not put your prettiest lady-boy front and center to welcome customers?). In fact, while we were in Thailand, the big news was a new Thai airline announcing the hiring of the first three lady-boy flight attendants in Thailand's history.

All-in-all, Thailand was a fabulous destination. It was a very welcoming country and we'll definitely consider going back.

Tuesday, February 8, 2011

## [2 Nights in Kolkata](#)



We thought Thailand was a land of contrasts – until we arrived in Kolkata. This city of 14 million people has got to be the poorest city we've ever landed in. Crowded and dirty, there were heart-breaking scenes of homeless women sleeping on the streets and children begging everywhere. The guidebook says that the British moved the capital of India to Delhi in 1911 "leaving Calcutta to rot" and it shows. The buildings are crumbling, the busses and trams look like they're about to keel over and it feels like the city is being held together with duct tape. Even the airport feels like it has seen better days. Yet among all this poverty and deterioration, there are 5-star hotels and brand new shopping malls with valet parking.

For us, Kolkata is just a stop-over on our way to Darjeeling, so we booked the [Hotel Trimoorti](#) which is one of the few budget hotels available in the city. This is a relatively un-touristed city, so services are harder to find. We found a cybercafé, but WIFI doesn't seem to exist anywhere. We couldn't find a city map so we had to rely on our guidebook, which didn't help much since there are virtually no street signs. There is plenty of street food available, but we weren't brave enough to try any. Restaurants are harder to find, but the mall did have a nice food court. One thing Kolkata does have is plenty of taxis. My guess is that for every person who can afford a cab, there must be at least 20 cabbies fighting for their business. Every time we flagged a taxi, at least 5 other drivers would try to steal us away. And the metered fare? Usually about \$1 or \$2 within the city center (it was \$5 from the airport to our hotel). And for that measly fare, the cabbie has to negotiate the most insane traffic we've ever seen. Plus everyone here honks – a lot – so there is this symphony of car horns blaring all day long, a constant sound texture that may take a while to get used to.

We hired a professional tour guide named Shanti Bhattacharya (98-3022-4803 or [santi\\_bhatta@yahoo.co.in](mailto:santi_bhatta@yahoo.co.in)) for a day and it was the best \$30 we spent since we left home. Shanti is a 75-year-old retired history teacher who was born and raised in Kolkata. His immense knowledge and sense of humor gave us great insight into Indian culture as we saw the city through his eyes. Although we only touched upon the highlights of Kolkata, the gems we did see were unbelievable. Since we arrived on the eve of [Shri Saraswati Puja](#), one of West Bengal's special holidays, the next day Shanti took us to see a centuries-old ritual -- the dumping of the Saraswati Puja into the Ganges River. We were told that over 40,000 statues would be dumped into the river by the end of the day. Another highlight was a visit to the dusty private home of Raja Rajendra Mullick Bahadur's family, also known as the "[marble palace](#)." Like the rest of the city, this "palace" was badly in need of some care, but it was fun to walk through haunted rooms and halls jam packed with art and antiques collected from all over the world.

The most interesting tidbit that Shanti offered was an explanation of why Kolkata's economy has collapsed. Since the communist party has been in power, tenants have stopped paying rent. Landlords can't kick out the tenants because of the corrupt court system. And without income, landlords can't do any repairs or pay taxes. With no tax income, the government has no money for services and repairs, which explains the decrepit scenes we're seeing city-wide.

Overall, Kolkata was a little overwhelming for us, so we re-booked our trains tickets and cut our stay short. Next, we're headed north towards Darjeeling. Unfortunately, today's front page newspaper headline told of new political unrest in "the hills" so we're not sure we'll even be able to get to Darjeeling.

Footnote: Kolkata time is GMT plus 5.5 hours. And I thought all time zones jumped by one hour, so that extra 30 minutes threw me for a loop. So why is this very critical piece of information kept a secret? This is India, I guess.

**Saturday, February 12, 2011**

## [2 Nights in Siliguri](#)



The last stop on the Darjeeling Mail is about 3km from Siliguri, a mini-Kolkata with a population of 1.5 million. Siliguri is known as the crossroads town of northeast India with trains, buses and taxis coming in from all directions. Typically, we would just hire a taxi or take the [Toy Train](#) directly to Darjeeling, but the [recent political unrest](#) and subsequent police killing of two protestors has prompted a general strike in "the Hills" and all transport going north have been cancelled. All, that is, except government-owned buses going north past Darjeeling to the state of Sikkim. So we booked the Hotel Manila for its central location in Siliguri and started looking around. What we saw was more dirt, grime, poverty, smog, and the constant honking of horns – just like in Kolkata, but this time in close-up. A walk through the shanty town next to the train station was heart-breaking. But even among all the extreme poverty, we saw plenty of smiles and glimmers of happiness. It just so happens that I'm currently reading the novel [Shantaram](#) where the slums of Mumbai were vividly described. But even so, I was not totally prepared for this experience.

If Siliguri was a nice place, we would have just hung out and waited out the strike. But we just got out of Kolkata to escape this urban madness, so Siliguri was the last place we wanted to be. We quickly changed our plans and decided to head to [Gangtok](#) in the state of Sikkim instead. We went to the Sikkim bus station to get our permits and to buy bus tickets. Permits were not a problem (and they're free). But bus tickets would be a different story. There were hundreds of other people at the bus station (almost all locals except for us and a few odd tourists) also trying to get on the 15 or so daily buses going north. We asked around and those lucky few to score tickets have been in line since 5am. Not very good news, indeed.

Then I got lucky. While asking about buses going to other cities besides Gangtok, I accidentally ran into the bus station's general manager. He told me to come see him at 9am the next morning and pointed to his office upstairs. He then took my name and made sure I already had a permit. When I showed up the next day, he had already reserved two seats for us on "bus number two," a bus that apparently only he can sell tickets to. While I was in his office, there was a constant stream of other people who somehow also knew about this alternative ticketing system. We felt really sorry for all the other people downstairs who had to stand in line for hours, but we were also ecstatic that we somehow managed to score tickets on the "VIP" bus.

With tickets in hand, we went to the Internet Café and booked a room in Gangtok and then boarded the standing-room-only bus for a 4-hour climb up to 4,000 ft above sea-level on twisted mountain roads. All



the north-bounded buses left together and traveled caravan-style, complete with police escort. About halfway there, we crossed into the state of Sikkim, and made a pit stop in the border town of Rangpo where we snacked on [momos](#) and fresh orange juice. It was dark by the time we arrived in Gangtok, so we have no idea what this town really looks like. I guess we'll find out in the morning.

**Friday, February 18, 2011**

## [7 Nights in Gangtok](#)



Going to Sikkim is like going to another country. Technically we're still in India, but to me this feels more like Tibet. [Sikkim](#) is the northern most state of India which borders Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. In fact Sikkim was its own kingdom until 1975 when it became a state of India. The local tongue is Nepali, not Hindi, but almost everyone speaks some English. Tourism is a major industry for Sikkim and the government is trying very hard to make tourists feel welcome. In [Gangtok](#), the capital of Sikkim, there are fines for spitting and littering, and for the first time in India we actually saw real trash bins in public spaces. When we arrived in Gangtok, there were virtually no tourists here because of the strike in Darjeeling shut down the only road to Gangtok. What few tourists we did see were all Indian nationals except for about 4 other foreigners (we can tell they were tourists because like us, they had cameras). This suited us well as all the hotels were empty and discounts for rooms were readily offered.

Typically we like to stay at budget hotels because, well, we're on a budget. But the weather was very cold and we both came down with colds. Our \$40-per-night room at the [Bamboo Grove Retreat](#) was great, but even with a space heater and extra blankets, we couldn't get warm. So we did something we almost never do – we moved to a 4-star hotel. This is India, so 4-star hotels like the Nor-Khill can be had for \$110 per night after some negotiating. The [Nor-Khill](#) was a beautiful and opulent British colonial-style luxury hotel that looks like it has been frozen in time since it was built in 1932. The staff wore uniforms right out of old b&w movies and they were very eager to please. In fact, the hotel facilities used to be the guest house of the former king of Sikkim when royalty still ruled the land. But the most important thing was that our room was warm and we could take hot baths.

Gangtok is a very walkable town despite the fact that the entire city was built on the side of a mountain. There were several Tibetan monasteries and Hindu shrines in the area, so we visited them all. The markets were fun, the food was cheap and the entertainment rather cheesy ("live music" in Gangtok really means a guy singing with a karaoke machine). But the best meal we've had for a while was a tasty Sikkimese dinner at our hotel, complete with a fermented barley drink called [chang](#). We would have stayed in Sikkim longer, but the weather didn't cooperate. Many of the better tours from Gangtok involved a 4 or 5 hour drive north to the base of the Himalayan mountains, but the weather forecast up north was either cloudy or snowing. And the strike never let up, so we gave up on the idea of going to Darjeeling as well.

The next stop on our itinerary is Singapore, so when it came time to leave we had some decisions to make. We could just retrace our steps back to Bangkok to catch a cheap flight to Singapore, but we wanted to avoid the dirt and grime in Siliguri and Kolkata if at all possible. The nearest airport from Gangtok was in Bagdogra and fortunately SpiceJet had cheap flights from there to Chennai which would also allow us to make connections to Singapore. Since we had the time, we decided to make an

unscheduled stop to see what's around Chennai. Our guidebook recommended [Auroville](#), so that's where we're headed next.

**Monday, February 21, 2011**

## [Arriving at Auroville](#)



Afsanah Guest House

After landing in Chennai, we were picked up by a taxi for the 2.5 hour drive south to [Auroville](#). Once again, we arrived after dark, so there was a surprise waiting for us when we woke up the next morning -- we opened our eyes and thought we were in Japan. As it turned out, our guesthouse was designed by a German architect in the sparse Japanese [sukiya-style](#) complete with lily ponds and a Zen garden. Are we still in India?

Our beautiful [Afsanah Guesthouse](#) was not the only surprise waiting for us. We had very little time to research Auroville, so we arrived with just a superficial understanding of the town. But even

if we had read about Auroville extensively, nothing could have prepared us for actually being here.

Auroville is an experimental utopian community that was inaugurated in 1968 by devotees to [Sri Aurobindo](#) and his soul mate "[The Mother](#)." Through meticulous planning and dedicated manual labor, these visionary people took 3000 acres of arid desert and transformed it into a green utopia in just a few decades. Real infrastructure development started in the 1990s and the momentum has been building since. Today, there are over 2000 "Aurovillians" living and working here in this vibrant community. Although over 45 different nationalities are represented in Auroville, the residents are mostly Indian nationals, French and German.

Where most 1960s idealistic communal living experiments have failed, Auroville has not only survived but prospered. Their goals are lofty – universal human unity, transformation of consciousness and research into "sustainable living and the future cultural, environmental, social and spiritual needs of mankind." Their methods are radical and revolutionary -- decision-making by consensus, no hierarchical government, no exchange of money, communal ownership of property, and much more. The results are amazing. Although not all of these goals have been met, there has been great progress and tons of support from governments as well as individuals.

We're not unfamiliar with Hindu [Vedic](#) traditions, gurus and ashrams, so it came as no surprise that being here felt like being inside a very powerful spiritual vortex. For Aurobindo devotees, Auroville is a pilgrimage site as powerful as Kaaba is for people of Islamic faith. The fact that Auroville can exist in today's world is nothing short of a miracle and the sincere idealism of Aurovillians stirred up strong emotions in me that brought tears to my eyes. I'm typically quite skeptical of anything that's too good to be true, but being in Auroville makes me want to sell everything I own and join this amazing community. We have no plans to leave, so let's see what the next few days will bring.

Friday, February 25, 2011

## [The Mantrimandir](#)



So far, our stay in Auroville has been amazing. There are many highlights, but perhaps the most important one is entering the inner chamber of the Mantrimandir for the first time.

The [Mantrimandir](#) (literally "mother's house") is a giant 118-foot-wide glistening golden sphere-like object that's also the soul of Auroville. Conceived in 1971 and designed by architect Roger Anger, the Mantrimandir was not finished until 2008. Today, it is a huge tourist attraction that almost belies its true purpose – to serve as a point of concentration to help people focus inwards. Getting to the inside the

Mantrimandir is a 3-day process, but once you've made it inside, you're welcome to come back for repeat visits as often as you like (by reservation, of course).

Architecturally, the Mantrimandir is an awe-inspiring object. The golden discs are made up of over 2 million gold-plated mosaic leaves that were positioned by hand (that's real gold, mind you). As one walks up to the structure, one can't help but feel its immense power. You enter the Mantrimandir by walking up one of the four staircases. As I entered the Mantrimandir, I couldn't help fantasizing that I was entering a spaceship ready for take-off. Once inside, the architect's vision takes over and you are compressed into a small space before walking up spiral staircases that suddenly opens up to an enormous spacious chamber. A much longer spiral walkway takes you up to the entrance of the inner meditation chamber (Aurovilians prefer to say "concentration" instead of "meditation"). The walk up the ramp was surreal and extremely emotional for me as the simple beauty of the design – the perfect arcs and spirals, the mathematical proportions, the purity of the geometry, all worked together to enhance an already intense experience. Once again, images from science fiction films like *Metropolis* and *2001* were evoked.

Once you enter the inner chamber, visitors are invited to sit around a circle facing a giant crystal ball lit by a single beam of sunlight coming from the top of the sphere. There are 12 columns surround the crystal, almost cradling it. This is the purest sacred space I've ever seen. No church, ashram, temple or mosque has ever evoked such strong feelings in me. So either there's something profound going on here or this is the finest testament to the power of architectural design.

At first I was peeved that there was no photography allowed inside the Mantrimandir. In hindsight, it makes perfect sense. No photograph can do justice to the intense feeling of walking through that sacred space. Besides, the act of taking photographs will undoubtedly take you out of being in the moment which defeats the purpose of entering the Mantrimandir in the first place.

The design of the Mantrimandir and the concept of Auroville will undoubtedly evoke comparisons to Disney's original vision for Epcot Center. The comparisons are fair as both were conceived in the idealistic 1960s although the Aurovilians claim that their Mantrimandir design was first. If critics want to call Auroville a theme park for new age spiritualism, then it's only fair to label Epcot Center as an ashram for American capitalism and global corporate branding.

Another interesting association for me is the film [2001: A Space Odyssey](#). When I first saw the film as a teenager, I did not understand it at all. It was only upon repeat viewings that Stanley Kubrick's message became clear. In my opinion, the next step in human evolution as depicted in *2001* is not that far off from

The Mother's vision of awakening human consciousness and transformation. Not surprisingly, *2001* was released in 1968, the same year Auroville was inaugurated. Coincidence or serendipity?

**Monday, February 28, 2011**

## [Happy Birthday Auroville](#)



Today is Auroville's 43rd birthday. At 5:30am, we went to Auroville's birthday celebration bonfire at the outdoor amphitheatre next to the [Mantrimandir](#). At the center of the amphitheatre is an urn that contains handfuls of soil from every state of India and almost every country in the world. The soil samples were placed in the urn at Auroville's inauguration ceremony on February 28, 1968. Every year, hundreds of people attend the birthday celebration bonfire to honor [the Mother's](#) dream and to contemplate the symbolic urn.

I've never attended a birthday "party" quite like this one. Silence is expected as everyone is invited to sit quietly around the bonfire to contemplate the moment. The energy of hundreds of other people present can definitely be felt. Personally, I also felt very connected to Auroville's past as well as the future of this very special place. As the sun rose, one could start to make out the faces of all the other people present. Although no words were spoken, it was clear that everyone in attendance today was very unified in spirit. I think all of us were reminded of the purpose of Auroville's existence – to help achieve human unity across all cultures, religions and social status.

Auroville's history was quite tumultuous. The original vision for Auroville was the Mother's dream. When she was still alive, she wrote the original [charter](#), collaborated with architects and city planners and even chose the specific location that was to become the center of Auroville. After she died in 1973, political infighting and power struggles divided the devotees working on this monumental project. However, the Mother's original charter stood the test of Indian courts and Auroville became an independent entity no longer controlled by the Pondicherry ashram where the Mother once resided.

The stories of the original pioneers who built Auroville from literally nothing are recorded in a wonderful book called [Turning Points](#). Their candid personal stories are crazier than fiction, extremely moving and told with great wit. The stories expand upon Auroville's many accomplishments since its inauguration 43 years ago: Over 2 million trees and shrubs planted, major infrastructure constructed (roads, water, telephone, waste collection, etc.), education and empowering programs for local villages initiated, ongoing alternative energy experiments conducted, award-winning buildings designed and built, and much much more. Today, we're all benefactors of the energy, dedication and perseverance of these crazy pioneers who believed a better world was possible and then actually did something about it. And it was all done without any commercial motives or corporate sponsorship.

It feels to me that Auroville's momentum which has been building for decades now is just about ready to explode. Who knows what these people will accomplish in the next 10 years. I guess I'll just have to come back to see for myself.

P.S. It just so happens that today is my birthday, too. Coincidence or serendipity?

Saturday, March 5, 2011

## [Auroville Today](#)



The Auroville Master Plan

We've been in Auroville for over 2 weeks now and we're starting to feel really comfortable here. This community has the vibe of a 1960s hippie commune doused with a heavy dose of European sophistication. Even though this is still India and there are social constraints, one feels relatively free to do as one pleases inside Auroville. Sustainable ecological living is the norm here (no plastic bags or bottles!) and since the town is a laboratory, the architecture is pretty radical and visionary. Although we're only "guests," we're starting to fantasize about the possibility of becoming residents some day.

Auroville is definitely a work-in-progress. Almost all the roads are still dusty dirt roads because the permanent roads in the master plan have not been built yet. Since all the "settlements" are spread out over a fairly large area, almost everyone travels by petrol-fueled motorbikes (although we did see a few electric bikes). Auroville's ultimate goal is to be a living embodiment of human unity, yet there is still a cultural gulf between the Europeans and the [Tamil](#) locals. Despite efforts to include the locals within Auroville culture, it's clear that Europeans are in charge and most (but not all) of the Tamil people end up working as maids, dishwashers, sweepers, taxi drivers, etc. Although the locals have benefitted greatly from Auroville's economy and education initiatives, sometimes this town still feels like a neo-French colony. Auroville is aware of these and other problems which are all mentioned in their promotional literature. Acknowledgement of these problems also means they're trying to find solutions. It's a refreshingly honest approach to self-promotion that rarely happens in capitalist for-profit corporate propaganda.

Auroville does a really good job welcoming guests. There are plenty of restaurants here serving a great variety of cuisines, although authentic Indian food is still hard to find (everything has been "mildly spiced" for sensitive European palettes). The French influence is definitely felt here as you can easily find quiche, crepes, [galettes](#) and croissants without trying. There is a great emphasis on healthy eating, so almost all the produce is organic and there are salads on almost every menu. Even the drinking water here is [Dynamized](#) and it tastes great. A nutritious healthy and satisfying lunch can be had for as little as \$2. While we were here, a new raw food restaurant just opened. But you won't find beer or wine on any menu because alcohol is discouraged (but non-alcoholic beer is available).

For a community of just over 2000 residents, there is an overabundance of culture available in Auroville. There's almost always something to go to every night (on some nights there are schedule conflicts for competing events) and during the day, one can choose from a variety of classes and seminars to attend. While I was here, I attended several dance performances, and saw some great documentaries and foreign films. On our last weekend here, there was a contemporary Indian film festival (projected in 35mm no less). Best of all, all the events are free (but the classes do charge a small fee).

There are plenty of guesthouses for visitors available in all price ranges (we paid \$44 per night for our room which is on the higher end of the scale). But to feel comfortable here, you'll have to temporarily set aside your sarcastic side. Auroville settlements have names like Aspiration, Acceptance, Surrender, Hope, Transformation, etc. – and there's not an ounce of irony in any of the names. Auroville might be harder to accept for those who have a phobia of cults or a strong allergic reaction to New Age spiritual clichés as you'll find devotional photos of [Sri Aurobindo](#) and [the Mother](#) almost everywhere.

Ultimately what moved me most about Auroville is the fact that the residents here are not just talking about a better world, they're actually building it. And they're doing it with the purest of intention, without any commercial motivation or personal profit in mind. No matter what anyone says, the world needs Auroville now more than ever.

**Tuesday, March 8, 2011**

## [India Epilogue](#)



India is a huge country and in the month that we were here, we barely scratched the surface. We discovered that we didn't like the noisy and crowded big cities, so we spent most of our time in more manageable smaller towns. We spent some time in the north as well as the south. We heard many tongues being spoken – Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Nepalese – but fortunately almost everyone we came in contact with understood some English. We saw the wealthy, educated and Westernized India as well as the poorest shanty towns. And despite all the stories we've heard, we never got the dreaded "[Delhi Belly](#)" even once. But before we take off for Singapore, here are a few random thoughts about India.

The first thing we had to get used to in India was the "[head bobble](#)." Often, when we asked a question we would get a response in the form of a head shake that kind of looked like a "no." Soon we realized that what we thought was a typical USA head shake was really a "head bobble." And the meaning behind the head bobble was not "no," but rather "yes" (or "ok" or "no problem"). Be warned, the head bobble is rather contagious. By the time we left India, we were doing it as well.

A little harder to get used to is Indian street etiquette. On the first day in India, we saw some expert spitting and pissing on Kolkata's streets. It seems Indian men have had a lot of practice spitting. The spit always seems to come out of the spitter's mouth with great force and in almost a straight line. This also allows the spitter to aim the spit with great accuracy. Almost as admirable was an act of tissue-less nose blowing that was done with almost the same level of expertise. I'm pretty sure not a drop landed on the nose-blower's clothes. Not surprisingly, men in India like to piss outside just like in the USA, and they're not shy about it either. But how to do the same in the crowded streets of a big city without exposing oneself? Well, there's the squat technique. Apparently, if you squat facing a wall, you can pull it out at just the right angle so that passersby can't see anything and you can happily piss away even as people are walking by. Fortunately, India also has a tradition of removing shoes before entering a house. And I'm just guessing, but women must not drink as much water or they just know how to hold it in because we didn't see a single woman peeing in the streets.

India is a very crowded country, so standing in queue is a fact of life. But I didn't realize that one must also

protect one's place in queue with great resolve. Indians are very skilled in the art of queue cutting. It's done almost like a magic trick. In a blink of an eye, someone could slip right in front of you leaving you to wonder how it happened. The several times I left myself open to this sleight of hand, I noticed that the act is performed like a well-rehearsed dance routine. No eye contact is made, and there's an air of innocence around the performance as if the choreographed body language was saying, "Gosh, I didn't know you were standing in line. Why I would never cut in front of you if I knew. No way. But thanks for letting me in anyway."

In the USA, we're used to having electricity 24/7. Not so in India. Daily power outages are common in India, especially in the afternoon. This fact of life is so routine that almost all hotels have battery-operated [UPS backup systems](#). In fact, the electrical wiring has been designed with this in mind as at least one circuit is hooked up to the UPS system so that some electricity is available for guests at all times. As for stores, all their computers are also on the UPS system so that shoppers can continue to check out even if the power goes out. Very smart, indeed.

Bollywood movies are often over 3-hours long, so having an intermission makes sense. However, when shorter Hollywood movies or other imports are shown in Indian cinemas, there's also an intermission regardless of the length of the film. Of course we were caught by surprise when we went to the local cineplex and the lights went on in the middle of the movie -- during a critical scene no less. I suppose for practical purposes, this convention makes sense as moviegoers will have an opportunity to get refills on popcorn and allow the theatre concession stand to make some money. Apparently there's some controversy around this issue as Indian audiences like their intermissions and are fighting to keep them. While we were in India, history was being made as the new film [Dhobi Ghat](#) was being released "without interval" and it was big news.

Being in India is a life-altering experience. Without a doubt, our eyes were opened wide and it's going to take while to integrate this experience.

**Saturday, March 12, 2011**

### **[3 Nights in Singapore](#)**



Since Singapore is right in between India and Bali, we had to make a stop there if only to eat. We've heard stories about Singapore's obsession with food so we had see for ourselves what the fuss was all about. We've been eating very clean and healthy in Auroville for almost 3 weeks, so now we're craving some greasy and junky street food.

We've read about Singapore's [hawker food centers](#), so as soon as we checked into [our hotel](#), we headed straight for [Lavender Food Square](#), which just happens to be one block away. This open-air food court was surrounded by about 40 food vendors selling everything from frog porridge to turtle soup. There was Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai and even Nepalese stands. No fusion crap here, this is pure authentic pan-Asian cuisine in its unadulterated form. This is food heaven.

Interestingly enough, there was very little direct competition between the vendors as each hawker had a specialty and no 2 food stalls sold the same dish. For the diner, the selection was overwhelming – it's like

putting together a meal by choosing the best dishes from 40 different restaurants. And since each restaurant has only one specialty, they must be really good at making it, right?

Years ago, these food vendors would have been pushing carts out on the street with no access to electricity and clean water. Today, they are licensed and don't even have to do their own dishes as the food court employs a staff to bus the tables and keep things clean. Everything we ordered was delicious and affordable – a truly civilized way to enjoy tasty “street food” without any worries. We decided that this was the way to eat out and during our time in Singapore and we ended up not eating at a single “traditional” restaurant.

Hawker centers come in all shapes and sizes. Besides our neighborhood “Food Square,” we also ate at the famous [Maxwell Food Centre](#) (recommended by [Anthony Bourdain](#)) and several air-conditioned food courts inside shopping malls with names like Food Republic, Food Village and Food Opera (what ever happened to “Food Orgy”?). Each location had its own atmosphere and some unique dishes to offer. But we decided that most delicious and the most authentic place to eat was our first stop – the Lavender Food Square.

Singapore reminds me a lot of Chicago. It's not too crowded, there's an efficient mass transit system and a river runs right through the heart of the city. There's even a giant Ferris wheel right on the waterfront. But the most distinguishing feature about Singapore is that it's clean -- very clean. Even the tap water is drinkable (and it tastes pretty good, too).

Singapore is not a cheap city and we totally blew our budget here. Our hotel was over \$100 a night and even though we ate at relatively cheap hawker centers, we paid Champaign-Urbana restaurant prices. As it turned out, 3 nights was just about the right amount of time to spend in Singapore. The experience was definitely worth it and with our bellies full, we're off to Bali.

**Thursday, March 31, 2011**

## [20 Days in Bali](#)



We enjoyed our pre-arranged airport pick-up in Chennai so much that we decided to arrange the same in Bali. There are no worries, no stress and it costs about the same as a cab ride. And there's that warm and fuzzy feeling you get when you see the driver holding a sign with your name on as you exit the airport.

[Ubud](#) is a small town about an hour north of the airport that's known as the cultural capital of Bali. We've been to Ubud before and we liked it, so we decided to book the [Honeymoon Cottages](#) in central

Ubud as our first stop. At first, we thought we'd rent a house here and settle down for a month or so. Ubud has lots of great restaurants and tons of culture, so we could easily spend some time here. But the owner of our Auroville guest house had highly recommended the Taman Sari resort up north, so we decided to check it out.

[Taman Sari](#) is located on a remote stretch of black volcanic sand beach in the little village of [Pemuteran](#). There's not much to do here, so we weren't planning to stay too long. But a series of mishaps with broken air conditioners got us an upgrade from a cottage to a villa and that changed everything. Taman Sari's



villas are private units that come in clusters of three surrounding a private pool. Our unit was in the resort owner's complex and had a salt water pool. A day after we moved in, the owner left on an extended trip and we had the entire complex to ourselves so we took advantage of the situation and always swam in the nude. Yes, there was a beach just a few hundred feet away, but why would one bother? No, the irony of flying halfway around the world to stay at a beach resort only to lounge by the pool was not lost on us.

Pemuteran's beach has several resorts, each with its own restaurant. The main road also has several good local [warungs](#) with slightly cheaper menus (tip: it is assumed that foreigners don't like spicy dishes, so be sure to ask for "[fresh sambal](#)" or your food will taste very bland). Just a short boat ride away is [Menjangan Island](#) where the snorkeling is amazing. The coral reefs are stunningly beautiful and the fish are abundant. In fact, the snorkeling here is so good we went back for more two more times. All this combined with the comfort of our private villa forced us to extend our stay.

The entire island of Bali is a huge tourist destination with major developments still under way. The fact that [Eat Pray Love](#) (the best-selling book and movie) was set here is making Bali ever more popular. What's different about Bali than any other tourist destination we've been to is the character of the people here. Balinese people are very gentle and seem happy and content by nature. Their culture is rich with art, music, dance and ritual. By Western standards, they may not have a lot of material goods, but they seem to have a rich spiritual life. And they like to treat visitors like us as if we're friends and family. For example, when a local boy approaches you to chat, he doesn't really want anything from you except a chance to practice his English. That's what makes Bali special.

**Saturday, April 9, 2011**

## [8 Days in Java](#)



Java is the next island over to the west of Bali. Java wasn't on our list of stops to make, but our friend Danny lives there and he invited us to come over to take a look. Danny was an international exchange student from Indonesia who came to Parkland College on a scholarship a few years ago (we were his "[homestay family](#)" in the USA). So we flew over to [Yogyakarta](#) (a.k.a. "Jogja") for a visit since it was only a short hop over by plane. Jogja is Java's second largest city (after Jakarta) and it is also Java's artistic and cultural center. The city lies in the shadows of [Mount Merapi](#), an active volcano that last erupted in October of 2010. Jogja is a popular tourist destination for Indonesians, but there are very few foreigners here. Bali is the polar opposite with almost all foreign tourists, so we're getting a more authentic Indonesian experience here in Java.

Upon landing in Jogja, we headed immediately north to [Borobudur](#), the most popular attraction on the island. Borobudur is a restored Buddhist temple built around the 8th century. It is the largest Buddhist temple in the world and it is extremely well preserved because it was covered with volcanic ash and "lost" for many centuries. It wasn't until the 1970s that restoration work began and the entire temple was taken apart stone by stone, cleaned, and meticulously put back together again with structural reinforcement and a new drainage system. To make our visit to Borobudur special, we booked the [Manohara Hotel](#) which is right on the grounds of the temple complex so that we could partake in a 5 a.m. sunrise guided tour the next morning. The temple was so impressive we went back again twice for another look before returning to Jogja.

Another major highlight of our Jogja visit was an excursion to [Prambanan](#), the restored Hindu temple complex that's just as impressive as Borobudur but much less well known. Built at around the same time as Borobudur and located within an hour's drive of each other, both temples stand as historical testament that multiple religions can co-exist peacefully in the same region at the same time. The rest of the week in Jogja was spent shopping in the central [Malioboro](#) district and trying out the local cuisine. Throughout the week, I tried various cooked jackfruit dishes, two types of ox skin stews and a bowl of soup with a roasted chicken head. The best deal was a delicious bowl of noodle soup with mysterious unrecognizable ingredients bought for 10 cents from a street vendor right in front of [Rumah Mertua](#), our second hotel.

We also met up with our friend Danny and his friends who picked us up for a tour of the Java countryside and [Salatiga](#), his current home town. Danny will be graduating with a bachelor's degree this year and he has plans to go abroad to study for a master's degree. So who knows, maybe he'll end up coming back to the USA.

Japan would have been our next stop, but with the recent earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis still unresolved, we changed our plans. We'll be coming home a week earlier than expected, but the timing feels right. We've been gone for over 3 months and we are definitely starting to miss the comfort of home.

**Thursday, April 14, 2011**

## [Home Sweet Home](#)



102 days after we left, we arrived home again. This is the longest time we've ever been away and it feels great to be back where everything is familiar and you can have things exactly the way you like it. It's been a privilege to be able to travel spontaneously, to adjust [our itinerary](#) whenever we felt like it, to stay longer or shorter at any location depending on our mood. We had great luck wherever we ended up and managed to serendipitously come across hidden gems and make special discoveries at almost every turn. And we didn't do so bad budget-wise either as we were able to stick close to our plan of spending only \$100 per day. But had we gone to

Japan as planned, we probably would have really gone over.

It will take weeks, if not months for me to digest this amazing experience. But as of right now, if there is one word that can summarize the entire trip, it is "guilt." Every day, we read about the widening gap between those who have wealth and those who do not. On this trip, I was confronted with the reality of this discrepancy almost every day. Of course this is completely my fault for choosing destinations where our dollars could be stretched. I suppose if I wanted to avoid guilt, a trip to Europe could easily make me feel like a pauper in just a couple of days. But instead of feeling lucky to have what I have, I felt sad for those who have so little. It would have been okay if the poor and uneducated had opportunities to improve themselves. But they do not and are doomed to live out their lives in poverty. The world today is

simply not a fair place.

On this trip, it also became obvious to me that government and policies can make a huge difference in the well-being of its people. In countries with weak or corrupt governments, market forces have taken over and these are the countries where the common people are suffering the most. It's obvious to me that market forces don't always make things better, and in fact they often facilitate the exploitation of the little people by letting the bullies have their way. Capitalism is simply not fair and only a strong government can level the playing field.

So now that I have reliable internet access again, it's time to finish up the [sabbatical project](#). But first, I'm going to cook myself a good home-made meal. No more eating out for a while!

**Thursday, September 22, 2011**

## [YMCA Site Relaunch](#)



Although the new University YMCA web site has been live for a few weeks now, today was the official site relaunch. To celebrate, the YMCA held a party and invited their board members to a reception in the Murphy Lounge. Development Director Becca Guyette made the introductions and everyone who worked on the web site was acknowledged and thanked.

This project was the culminating work of many months and many people. For me, it was a professional development project as outlined in my original sabbatical proposal. For the client, it

was a much-needed re-branding of their visual identity and a fresh direction for their marketing efforts. For Mike Stephens, another YMCA volunteer, it was an opportunity to test a new CMS (content management system) that he has been developing for some time now. For Jenni Kotting, the YMCA's communications director, it was a labor of love as she spent countless hours organizing and formatting the content for the web site.

Large web sites like this require a collaborative effort among many people. I learned a lot designing with the latest CSS and Javascript frameworks, building a cutting-edge web site that will serve the client well for years to come. I gained some experience working with CMS and database-driven web technology. While working on this project, I was forced to peek under the hood (so to speak) and explore the intricate connections behind the scenes that make it all work. I also found a wonderful collaborator in Jenni who acted as information architect, webmaster, graphic artist, web promotion manager (and more) as she learned the ins-and-outs of managing a fairly complicated web site. The end result was an experience that taught me much-needed lessons in real-world web design and made me feel good at the same time. I've always believed in the University YMCA's mission of social justice and if this web site helps them further their mission, then I've done my job well.

The entire process has been recorded on this [Project Page](#). You can also view the final web site at [www.universityymca.org](http://www.universityymca.org).