

Charmaine's Diary

15th February 2010

Monday

Meet with Suas Educational Development in Dublin, a charity dedicated to supporting quality education in targeted under-resourced communities to discuss the upcoming visit to India. Suas are also the crazy people that paint shamrocks on your face on St Patrick's Day. Have the opportunity to meet my fellow travellers – journalist Tom Lyons and photographer Brian Meade, both of the Sunday Times as well as Newstalk's Chris Donoghue. Bond over dinner – appropriately we go to an Indian. Acclimatisation we call it.

Tuesday

Do an in-studio radio interview with Tom Dunne of Newstalk about the search for my replacement – the 2010 Rose of Tralee! First time to see the man behind the well-known voice and am excited to meet he who released "Tom Dunne's Best 30 Irish Hits" – a CD I used to take with me years ago when I was travelling in the event of homesickness. We joke about his dodgy pronouncing of my name that makes me sound like Charmin the toilet paper. A natural conversationalist who puts me at ease. Drive home to Athy and catch up on the back-log of articles and questionnaires I have to write for various newspapers and websites.

Wednesday

Visit the Healthy Living Centre in Athy to promote their Rude Health Week, a countrywide push by the Irish Association of Health Stores (IAHS) to encourage ongoing good health habits. Lots of photos. Fail to convince people that Aloe Vera juice is not only very good for you but also tastes lovely. Owner Kevin Connolly takes great care of me and has me tasting all sorts of concoctions that he guarantees will put a pep in my step.

Thursday

Drive to Naas to do an in-studio radio interview with KFM (Kildare FM) about the time I spent in Belarus with the Chernobyl Children's Project and also about the launch of the search for a new Rose. It's hard to believe that the 2010 Arizona Rose has already been selected and the other selections, both in Ireland and internationally, are all taking place over the next couple of months. The KFM presenter, Clem Ryan, was my Gaeilge teacher in secondary school. Never did either of us think we'd be in this situation when he was teaching me the Modh Coinníollach. Visit "Love Lab" in the Trinity College Science Gallery, an exhibition and research project that promises to untangle the science of desire! Between the gang of us we are subjected to all sorts of tests that try to address questions such as what lies behind those butterflies you feel when you fall in love, what makes one person's dream date a nightmare for another and does romance really exist or do our genes precondition us to seek out particular partners. Unfortunately we leave none the wiser but do agree that the project is an interesting and engaging way to collect data and certainly gives us a few giggles. Meet friends for dinner. Furiously do some last minute packing for India.

Friday

Wake up in a panic to realise that I had fallen asleep whilst setting my alarm and that there's only 1 ½ hours 'til my flight to Delhi via Abu Dhabi is to take off. The Carlton Hotel bus almost does wheelies to get me there as soon as possible. Check-in staff sternly advise me not to turn up so late the next time as the desk was to close in two minutes. An appreciatively uneventful trip thereafter. Watch some easy-on-the-brain chick flicks to calm down and start into a book. Bryan Patten, Partner Support team manager with Suas, meets me at 3.30am at Delhi airport. Ironic that we meet here again in India because Bryan was the group co-ordinator when I volunteered for 3 months in the summer of 2003.

Saturday

Wake up late to the alien but familiar sound of bustling Indian life – the constant barking of car horns harmonised by the callings of street sellers marketing their wares and the high-pitched song of ladies making what seem to be religious prayers. Day one we play it safe and catch an auto-rickshaw (three-wheeled motor vehicle – similar to a tuk tuk in Thailand) to Khan market, one of the more upscale shopping areas to grab a bite to eat. Our aim is to avoid Delhi Belly. I order an aloo veg roll and wonder why don't they have these at home. Delicious! I notice that the market has seen a lot more Western shops creep in since I last visited - never thought I'd see L'Occitane skincare here. Take a stroll in nearby Lodi Gardens, a haven from the chaos that is Delhi, spread over 90 acres. Bryan fills me in on the itinerary for the week and news of old friends in the partner organisations, Development Action Society (DAS), Sabuj Sangha and Vikramshila. Attend a dinner at the Residence of the Ambassador of Ireland to India, H.E. Kenneth Thompson. Bryan shows me the invite and I am embarrassed to read that the reception is being held especially "to meet the Rose of Tralee, Ms. Charmaine Kenny". About thirty five people attend – the entirety of the Irish community in Delhi, the Ambassador tells me. The evening is a delight with an informal buffet that sets Irish Stew aside Dal Tarka, great chat with Irish ex-pats working with UNICEF, representing Enterprise Ireland and teaching flamenco guitar, and I even get serenaded with the Rose of Tralee song by none other than the Ambassador himself.

Sunday

Visit the UNESCO World Heritage site, Humayan's Tomb, a complex of buildings built as the Mughal Emperor Humayun's tomb dating back to c.1562. It created a precedent for future Mughal architecture of royal mausolea, which reached its pinnacle with the infamous Taj Mahal. Very impressive. Feel very spoiled to have the luxury of such a gentle reintroduction to India. The real mission of visiting partner projects begins tomorrow. Fly to Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), a city for which I have a great fondness and even on the taxi journey from the airport, I feel more at home.