

Second quarterly report

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The first time I read about Auroville on the internet and I found it by pure chance. I wanted to go abroad for one year after graduating from high-school and before entering university. Therefore, I was looking for a project taking part in the German government funded "weltwaerts" programme which would suit my interests and capabilities. I was especially interested in India as I have been here once before for an internship and got to like the country very much.

After a successful application at Auroville International Germany e.V (AVI-G), I was looking forward to my year in India which lay ahead of me. Back in Germany our group of 17 volunteers attended two obligatory preparatory seminars which were extremely well organised and informative. Looking back now, I appreciate the comprehensive and professional preparation we have had in advance of coming to India.

After our arrival in Auroville in August we had one great introductory week where we got to see many important places in Auroville and also all our different volunteer projects. In the first few days we started looking for permanent places to stay and soon after I moved in a beautiful house along with two other volunteers.

Before coming to India I had been told a few times to lower my expectations in order to not get disappointed. Therefore, after our arrival I was able to easily accept the warm climate, the food and the many insects and other animals. The heat only really negatively affected the nights as it was hard to sleep with 30°C+ degrees. The strong monsoon during the months of November and December worsened the condition of the roads in Auroville so that some streets were entirely impassable. In addition to the moisture, the lack of places to dry clothes led to the development of mould on clothing and bed sheets. Although I did not mind the rain very much, I was still looking forward to the end of the monsoon.

The food in Auroville is great and overall of very high quality, e.g. a lot is organic and vegan. It is definitely less spicy and more international than the traditional south Indian kitchen which made it easy to adapt to it. We used to cook together in the evenings quite often, but also enjoyed going out and tasting the great diversity of Aurovillian food culture. After having lunch in Solar Kitchen for the first four months I was a bit fed up with the weekly repeating food schedule and therefore started eating at PTDC.

In our house we had lived together with a lot of different animals in the past months such as cockroaches, geckos, frogs, spiders, mosquitoes and other insects. Most of them are completely harmless and I do not mind them at all, but I am very happy to have an insect bed net to fend off mosquitoes at night. Even more so, as it has become apparent that I seem to be a very attractive target to them.

One week after my arrival in India I started an intense training of capoeira (a Brazilian martial art which combines dance, acrobatics and music) which I have continued in the past six months, training on average 3 times a week. I enjoy this sport a lot and appreciate the nice people in my group. The feeling of simply training together has changed over time more to a feeling of community and friendship. It has been great and motivating to experience my own progress in the past months and I am certain I will continue the training at least for as long as I am here in Auroville. One fantastic highlight of my

time in Auroville has been a four-day capoeira festival in the beginning of February which included inspiring training with experienced professionals and two public performances.

Apart from capoeira I have also attended a few yoga classes and an “Awareness through the body” introductory workshop.

When my fellow volunteer Kaya and I started our work at our project, the small NGO “WasteLess”, we got a comprehensive introduction on the topic of waste including one trip to the Pondicherry dump and hands-on learning of waste segregation at the Eco Service in Auroville. Until the point we joined WasteLess, the team consisted only out of the two project founders Ribhu & Chandrah who have grown up in Auroville and have helped us a lot to get settled after our arrival in India. The working atmosphere in the team is very good and often cheerful. The feeling of confidence in our work and skills supports our autonomy and the challenges we face help our learning process.

Our work at WasteLess covers a variety of different tasks and ongoing projects, the idea being that each of us in the team takes on the lead of at least one bigger project. In my case I have been working about two months mainly on the so-called “Pick It Up educational programme”, which uses a card game developed by WasteLess as a tool in a six lesson school curriculum. The work at WasteLess is almost exclusively an office job, which has its downsides such as not getting into much contact to nature outside during work. On the other hand we enjoy the convenience of not being exposed much to the climatic conditions such as heavy rains during the monsoon or burning heat in summer. And sometimes we leave the office and go to schools directly to pilot test our projects, give teachers trainings or conduct waste audits.

The pocket money, food compensation and rent support from AVI-G are mostly sufficient to cover the basic living expenses of my life in AV. For Indian standards it is a considerable budget, but the costs of food, goods, entertainment, services and rent in Auroville are also comparably high.

I have undertaken a number of trips and one bigger travel in the past few months in India. Especially during the month of January we travelled a lot as I had a total of four visitors from Germany. Until now I have visited Mamallapuram, Mailam, Gingee, Tiruvannamalai and Vellore for short weekend trips. We also made one seven-day travel to Madurai and Cochin which was mostly an exciting and fun experience apart from all of us getting sick in Cochin. The travelling itself was interesting and enjoyable as we went with sleeper buses and one sleeper train, a concept before unbeknownst to me.

Overall I had a great time in Auroville up until now and I never had a doubt that I made the right decision when I chose to come to India. I learned a lot in the past months and I am satisfied with the level of personal progress I made, which was one important reason for me to take a gap year in the beginning. To some degree I got to know a mix of different cultures such as the Tamil and Indian culture which are partly being contrasted with heavy western and international cultural influences in and around Auroville. I enjoy the freedom and self-responsibility of my life in Auroville very much and value my level of independence.

I most definitely look forward to the coming months and to whatever experiences lie ahead of me. Back in Germany I am going to start my university studies and although I have not yet made a final decision, I very much appreciate to have a lot of time to further inform myself about my future prospects. As we have been told by several former Auroville volunteers, I myself can also imagine the real cultural shock coming after our return to Germany. It will be interesting to see if and how I will be able to integrate what I have learned during my one year in India in my everyday life back home.