



## Volunteer Handbook for Bangalore, India

Namaste!

Welcome to our Volunteer Handbook for Bangalore, India.

While no person or book or website can give a new traveler to India a full understanding of its culture, we believe that this Handbook will go a long way in preparing you for your trip and the living experience there.

We have spent years revising this Handbook, based on the experiences of our volunteers and staff who have spent significant time in India. They have all have contributed their unique insights and advice to the information in this Handbook.

Although there is some overlap, our Volunteer Handbook for India does not try to duplicate all of the general travel information you will find in published Handbook books such as **Lonely Planet India** and the **Rough Handbook to India** (We recommend Lonely Planet).

Our main focus in the Volunteer Handbook for India is on travel information that is specifically relevant to a volunteer like yourself who will serve others in India and become a member of the local community.

We encourage you to share the Volunteer Handbook for India with your family and friends and anyone else interested in your trip to India. We also strongly recommend taking a copy with you on your trip.

As always, if you have any questions about the Volunteer Handbook for India or any other issues or concerns, please get in touch with us.

Regards,

Scott Burke  
Founder & Director  
Cosmic Volunteers  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania USA

## **BEFORE YOU GO**

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### **1. Entry Requirements for India**

In order to enter India, you must have:

#### **Passport**

- Must be valid for at least the next six months

#### **Tickets for your departure from India**

- India's Immigration Department has the right to ask you at the airport to show copies of either your return flight home or tickets for land travel if you are leaving India by land.

#### **Visa**

You must obtain a visa for India – before you arrive in India. A company called "[Travisa Outsourcing](#)" handles all requests for Indian visas. Visa applications take approximately 7-9 working/business days to process from the date of receipt. We advise you to be conservative and present the visa materials (by mail or in-person) to the consulate of India 3 weeks before you leave home for India.

Obtain the "tourist" visa from Travisa for India. [The visa process for the "tourist" visa is detailed at this web page](#). You first fill out the online application at their website, then print and sign the application, then present the application and the rest of the materials to Travisa for Processing:

- Your passport (valid for at least six months beyond the end of your intended stay)
- Printed and signed copy of the visa application (you fill it out online first)
- Two (2) passport-sized photos (stapled/glued to the visa applications)
- Money order for the visa fee
- Proof of home address
- Copy of birth certificate

After Travisa successfully processes your visa application, they mail your passport back to you with the Indian visa sticker inside your passport.

## 2. Health Preparation

We strongly recommend that you **visit a travel doctor** at least two months before you arrive in India for information about immunizations and advice on how to stay healthy there.

We also strongly recommend that you obtain a **travel insurance** policy that will cover any medical costs you might have in India. Cosmic's staff uses Multinational Underwriters ([www.mnui.com](http://www.mnui.com)) for travel insurance policies. Cosmic Volunteers does not provide health insurance to participants.

For **vaccinations**, India does not require any vaccinations for entry into India. Cosmic Volunteers follows the current vaccination recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) which are listed on their website at [wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/destinationIndia.aspx](http://wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/destinationIndia.aspx)

If you take **prescription medicines**, make sure you have enough to last during your trip. Keep them in their original prescription bottles and always in your carry-on luggage.

**Malaria** is a potentially fatal disease that is a major concern for travelers to India. Please speak with your travel doctor about whether you should take anti-malarial medicine. **You cannot be immunized against malaria.** Many anti-malarial drugs have to be started before you arrive in India. For a full discussion of malaria, visit the CDC's website at [www.cdc.gov/malaria](http://www.cdc.gov/malaria).

For **comprehensive health information** for travelers to India, visit the CDC's website at [wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/destinationIndia.aspx](http://wwwn.cdc.gov/travel/destinationIndia.aspx)

## 3. Register Your Trip with your Home Government

An optional but highly recommended pre-trip step is to register your travel plans to India with your home country's government. Doing this can be helpful if you lose your passport in India or if there is a country-wide emergency and you need your embassy's help. You can register with your respective government online at the following websites:

USA Citizens: <https://travelregistration.state.gov/ibrs/ui>

UK Citizens: <http://www.britishhighcommission.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1089125546964>

Canadian Citizens: <http://www.voyage.gc.ca/main/sos/rocapage-en.asp>

Australian Citizens: <https://www.oraofat.gov.au/oraofat/weboraofat.nsf/homepage?Openpage>

#### 4. Power-of-Attorney

Another optional but recommended pre-trip step is to consider creating a Power-of-Attorney document (POA) which lets you appoint someone at home to manage important financial and legal matters on your behalf while you are in India. This is a particularly smart thing to do if you will be staying in India for an extended period of time, say at least one month. You can create a custom POA document for \$35 USD online with Legal Zoom, which Cosmic staff uses for its POA documents while traveling. Legal Zoom's website is <http://www.legalzoom.com/power-of-attorney/power-of-attorney-overview.html>. Keep in mind that, after Legal Zoom mails you the POA, you must get the document notarized by a notary public before the document can take effect.

#### 5. Photocopy Important Documents

Before you leave home, make two sets of photocopies of all important documents. Put one set of copies in your checked luggage, and leave a set of copies at home with your family/friends. Keep your original documents in your carry-on bag while you are traveling to India.

##### Documents to Photocopy:

- Passport ID page
- India Visa
- Plane Ticket
- Yellow Fever card
- Contact information of India Coordinator\*
- Contact Information for Cosmic in USA\*
- Contact Information for family/friends at home
- Travel Insurance Policy
- Credit card(s)
- Travelers Checks (if you have them)
- Power-of-Attorney (if you have one)

\* We will send you this information by email before you leave for your trip.

## 6. Contact Information

Before you leave home, we will send you the mobile numbers of your Coordinators in India and the US. **They will be your 24 hour contacts during your program.** Please carry their contact numbers on your person (not your bags) while en-route to and in India.

If your flight(s) to India is delayed for any reason, please first call your India Coordinator 24 hours to let them know of the delay. If you cannot reach him/her for whatever reason, please call your US Coordinator 24 hours.

For non-emergencies, please contact us at our regular office phone at 1-215-609-4196 or by email at [team@cosmicvolunteers.org](mailto:team@cosmicvolunteers.org). Our office hours are Monday-Friday from 9am to 5pm EST. We monitor emails and voice mails on weekday evenings and weekends.

## 7. What to Pack

### Carry-On Bag

- Passport
- Plane Ticket
- Contact information of India Coordinator
- Cosmic's Emergency Phone Number (EPN)
- Contact Information for Cosmic's office in USA
- Contact Information for home (family, friends)
- Travel Insurance Policy
- Cash (at least \$100 USD or equivalent)
- Credit card(s)
- Travelers Checks (if you have them)
- Any prescription medicine
- Any electronic equipment (laptops, mobile phone, camera, mp3 player)
- Toiletries (Toothbrush/paste, contact lens solution & case, feminine products)
- Reading materials
- Pen(s)

Tip 1: During air travel, some travelers prefer putting their passport, cash, credit cards etc. in a money pouch that is concealed under their clothes for security. We've found that it's just as safe and convenient to put your cash and credit cards in a front pants pocket, and keep your passport in a front shirt pocket.

Tip 2: While in India, we always keep our passports in a sealable plastic baggie (the kind used for sandwiches). This protects the passport from moisture in the hot climate where your passport can become soggy, especially if it's in your pocket while you're traveling around the country.

### **Checked Baggage**

Don't overdo it. pack lightly so you can travel more easily and store your bag in small places. Think in terms of a backpack, duffel bag, or moderate-sized suitcase and a day pack. Because the climate is generally hot, you can often wash clothes out and dry them overnight. Bring lots of lightweight clothes. For men and women, it is better to dress conservatively.

#### Clothing:

- 5-6 pairs khaki pants (or jeans but jeans can be hot)
- 1-2 pairs shorts (for around the house and sports)
- 5-7 short-sleeved tops/t-shirts
- 1-2 long-sleeved shirts/tops
- Undergarments
- Women may want to bring a longer skirts instead of shorts and short dresses since it is more respectful of the culture
- Sturdy sneakers or shoes
- Sandals or flip-flops
- Cotton socks
- Sleepwear
- Light jacket or windbreaker
- A nice outfit for special occasions

#### Health and Hygiene:

- Handiwipes and anti-bacterial hand lotion
- Over-the-counter medications for pain relief, fever, diarrhea
- Insect repellent with DEET
- Sunscreen (stronger-the-better)
- Vitamins
- Toiletries (soap, shampoo)

Miscellaneous:

- Notebooks, pens, paper
- Glasses, contacts/solution - and bring a copy of your prescription
- Small travel pack/day pack
- Lightweight, quick-dry towel

**Bringing Gifts**

We do not encourage volunteers to bring gifts. Instead, focus on sharing yourself and your time and experiences with the people you meet in India. However, a great idea is to bring a small photo album of your family, friends, school, neighborhood, and work – to show others where you're from and a little more of who you are. This is one of the best ice-breakers for international travel. You can also consider practical gifts, such as picture frames, and cosmetics/soaps.

## ARRIVING IN INDIA

This section describes the normal schedule and activities for volunteers during their first several days in India. The major points will include the airport arrival, travel to the volunteer location, and introduction to the culture, host family, and volunteer work. Your actual schedule might vary from what is described below, depending on your arrival day and time as well as your volunteer location.

### **Arriving at the Airport in Bangalore**

- When your plane lands in Bangalore, you will be directed to the **Immigration counters**. Have your passport and disembarkation card ready (you receive the card during the flight). The immigration officer might ask basic questions such as “How long are you staying in India?” or “Is this your first time to India?”.
- After the Immigration officer stamps your passport, walk to **baggage claim**.
- We strongly recommend that you **exchange currency** at the currency counter in the baggage claim area. Exchange at least US\$50 or equivalent for India Rupees. (It is always a good idea to walk out of the airport in any country with some local currency on you.)
- Grab your luggage, then walk through the **Customs** lines and towards the exit doors.
- Before you exit the airport, the staff may ask you to show your **luggage tags** given to you by the airport check-in staff before you boarded your flight.
- When you walk through the airport’s **exit doors**, look for our Program Coordinator who will be holding a sign with your name on it.
- There are usually **big crowds** waiting outside the airport exit door. The scene can look chaotic and intimidating. Try to look calm (even if you’re not) and smile and scan the crowd for our Program Coordinator holding your name sign.
- Some **taxi drivers and hotel staff** might ask you if you need a ride or a room. They can be aggressive to the point of actually trying to take your bags away, but it is very important to smile and remain composed and tell them your “friend” is here at the airport to meet you. That should convince them to leave you alone.
- You and our Program Coordinator will take a taxi to **leave the airport**. At this point, please **contact someone back home** to let them know that you arrived in India safely. Your Program Coordinator will offer their mobile phone for a brief call or text message.



- The Program Coordinator will take from the airport to either a hotel in Bangalore for the first night, or travel with you immediately to your host family.

**If You Do Not Find Our Program Coordinator**

There might be an extremely unusual situation where you do not meet our Program Coordinator at the airport, such as a very late flight arrival. In this situation, speak to an airport representative and ask for help in making a telephone call to our Program Coordinator in Bangalore (All airport personnel and taxi drivers speak English). If you cannot reach the Program Coordinator in Bangalore, call Cosmic Volunteers' Coordinator in the US 24 hours, Scott Burke. He will arrange as quickly as possible for another Coordinator to pick you up at the airport, or he will direct you to take a taxi on your own to a hotel. (We will reimburse you for all costs: transport, hotel, phone, food.)

## YOUR FIRST DAYS IN INDIA

### **Introduction to India**

After your first night in Bangalore – whether at a hotel or your host family – your Program Coordinator will pick you up in the morning for your all-day introduction to India. This initial experience will be more informal and hands-on, with the Program Coordinator taking you around town to see life on the streets. This normally includes visits to local markets, cultural sites, and museums. They will also go over the major points about your stay such as staying healthy, street smarts, living with your host family, the volunteer work, contact information, etc. We also recommend that you take care of any practical errands such as:

- Buying a mobile phone / SIM card / phone credit
- Exchanging money / travelers checks
- Using an ATM machine
- Buying electrical adapters
- Buying a mosquito net
- Buy any toiletries
- Buying a small flashlight

At the end of the day, your Program Coordinator will drop you off at your host family to begin your home stay. You will have the remainder the day/evening to become acquainted with your family and to rest from your travel. Depending on your volunteer location, the host family could be a short 20-minute ride away or a two-hour trip to the suburbs of Bangalore. Traffic is always heavy, so be patient. The trip will be either via taxi or the Coordinator's private car. (All ground transportation from the airport to the volunteer location site is included in your program fee.)

Starting with your taxi ride from the airport, your road travel in India can really provide you with an unparalleled insight into the people, the sights, sounds, and smells(!) of India – all from the relatively insulated environment of a taxi or bus seat. So watch, listen, smile, ask questions, listen (to the endless car horns!), and just try to soak it in. As *Verge Magazine* says (Winter 2008): "Fifteen minutes on a bus usually teaches you more about a country's social, political, and economic conditions than three hours studying a Handbook."

## Introduction to Volunteer Work

On your second full day in Bangalore, your Program Coordinator will pick you up at your host family's house and accompany you to your **Volunteer Job** for introductions and a tour of the organization. You will meet with your Program Supervisor(s) for the first time and start learn some of the basics about the organization's work. There is also normally time for you to meet some of the people you will be helping such as orphanage children or medical patients. Depending on your specific schedule, you could begin your volunteer work today, such as playing with the children.

## Jet Lag

Flying across multiple time zones disrupts your body's circadian rhythm, leading to sleep problems and other symptoms which fall under the condition known as "jet lag."

Symptoms often include insomnia, waking early, excessive sleepiness, headaches, irritability, digestive problems like constipation or diarrhea, muscle aches, and difficulty concentrating. Younger travelers and female travelers are more susceptible to jet lag, while some travelers are not affected much.

As a general Guide, the recovery rate from jet lag is one day per time zone traveled. So if you live in New York (nine hours behind India), it could take you as long as nine days to fully recover from the jet lag.

To recover from jet lag:

- Drink plenty of water before, during and after your flight
- Try to sleep on the plane if it's nighttime in India
- Adjust to the local day/night schedule immediately
- Try not to sleep until nighttime in India, no matter how tired you are
- Exercise daily (during daylight hours, especially early morning)
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol

## WHILE IN INDIA

### **Staying Healthy and Safe**

The top causes of injury and death for travelers abroad are road accidents and drowning. This comes as a surprise to many, because the media tends to focus on terrorism, political strife, and infectious diseases as the most likely dangers for travelers abroad.

If you become ill or injured in India, please seek medical treatment immediately. Then as soon as possible, inform your host family and local Program Coordinator. They will contact our staff in the US so that we can assist in any way we can, such as notifying your family back home.

There are both government and private health facilities near all of our volunteer areas, with emergency and outpatient care available. There are also pharmacies (“drugstores”) throughout the country where you can buy medications. A doctor’s prescription is often required.

The three areas you need to focus on daily for staying healthy and safe in India are:

- **Food and Water**
- **Avoid Insect Bites**
- **Avoid Injuries**

### Food and Water

Traveler’s Diarrhea is the most common illness suffered by travelers to India. It’s usually caused by bacteria in the food or water you consume, and usually occurs within the first week of travel. You must be extra cautious about food and water.

Some very important tips:

- Do not drink tap water at any time in India
- Do not consume ice cubes
- Drink only bottled water, boiled water, or carbonated drinks in bottles/cans
- Wash your hands often with soap and water
- Avoid restaurants that look dirty
- Avoid food from street vendors
- Avoid raw fruits and vegetables unless you peel them
- Brush your teeth using only bottled water

- Stay hydrated (see “Hot Climate”)

### Avoid Insect Bites

You must avoid insect bites in India because you are at risk for illnesses such as malaria and dengue fever. Malaria is transmitted to humans by the bite of an infected female Anopheles mosquito. The first symptoms of malaria are normally fever, chills, sweats, headaches, muscle pains, nausea and vomiting (For a definitive diagnosis, you must have a lab test). The peak biting period for malaria is dusk and dawn.

To prevent insect bites:

- Stay indoors at dawn and dusk as much as possible
- When you are outside at night, wear long sleeves and long pants
- For sleeping, wear long sleeves and long pajama bottoms
- For sleeping, use a mosquito net treated with permethrin (mosquito nets cost \$10-\$15 USD in India)
- Use an insect repellent with 30%-50% DEET

### Avoid Injuries

- As a **pedestrian**, you must be very cautious, especially at night:
  - Vehicles always have the right of way
  - Assume that vehicles will not stop for you
  - There are sometimes no sidewalks
  - Some streets have open sewers on each side, so be careful
  - Due to lack of lighting, try to stay out of the road at night as much as possible since drivers might not see you
  - Jogging can be very dangerous due to traffic and uneven surfaces

- As a passenger in any vehicle:
  - Do not travel in vehicles late at night
  - Never sit in the front seat of any bus or taxi, since most accidents are head-on
  - Wear seat belts when possible
  - Do not take private, unlicensed taxis or cars
  - Never ride on the top of any vehicle
  - Do not ride on any motorcycles, either as driver or passenger
  
- If you take a weekend trip to a beach area: We strongly recommend that you **do not go swimming**. The rip currents in the ocean are very dangerous, even for the best swimmers.
  
- Do not have contact with **animals**. You will often see dogs and cats as well as farm animals (cows, goats) walking among people on the streets, even in large towns. You could get rabies, insect bites, and skin rash/infections, etc.

### Personal Greetings

Greetings in India are formal and a very important aspect of life there. Greetings are influenced by a number of factors, including social class, religion, and education level. Here are some tips:

- Always greet the eldest or most senior person first.
- When leaving a group, say goodbye to each person individually.
- Shaking hands is common, especially in the large cities like Bangalore.
- Men and women seldom shake hands, because of religious beliefs.
- If you are not sure what to do, wait for the other person to extend their hand.
- Instead of a handshake, the custom throughout India is the greeting known as "Namaste". To make this greeting, hold the palms of both hands together under the chin, smile, bow slightly and say "Namaste". It feels awkward to most westerners when they first do this, but you'll get the hang of it quickly.

## Dress Code

When you are in India, you must observe a conservative dress code, so that you do not give offence or draw unwanted attention. For women, this means that you should not wear short skirts and shorts, and your legs and shoulders should be covered. If you have any interest in visiting temples, you should keep a scarf in your bag so that you can cover your head when going inside.

## Table Manners

- Many Indians eat with their (right) hands.
- Always use your right hand to eat, whether you are using utensils or your fingers.
- Wait to be told where to sit.
- The guest of honor is usually served first, followed by the men
- Women typically serve the men, then eat later with the children.
- You may be asked to wash your hands before and after sitting down to a meal.
- Leave a small amount of food on your plate to indicate that you are satisfied.
- Finishing all your food means that you are still hungry.

## Hierarchy in India

The history of the caste system in India, as well as the influence of Hinduism, have led to today's culture where hierarchical relationships are of critical importance in everyday life. Every relationship, whether in the family, office, or on the street, has clear-cut hierarchies that are strictly followed. Although it is difficult for volunteers to gain a full understanding of these complex relationships and statuses among people, it is important that you know of their existence and learn to recognize some common ones:

- Status is determined by age, university degree, caste and profession.
- Indians revere titles such as Professor, Doctor and Engineer.
- Wait to be invited before using someone's first name without the title
- If someone does not have a professional title, use "Sir" or "Madam".
- Teachers are revered, usually called "guru", and seen as keepers of knowledge.

## Say It Isn't "No"

Indians have a very curious custom by which they do not like to give negative answers to questions. Instead of saying "No", Indians will instead offer you the response that they think you want to hear. On the surface, this sounds like dishonesty, but Indian feel that they are being rude if they do not attempt to give a person what had been asked. Indians may give you an affirmative answer but be deliberately vague about details. To sort this

out, you will have to look for non-verbal cues, such as a reluctance to commit to an actual date or time for a meeting.

## Money

The **Rupee** is the legal currency of India. The exchange rate is 1 USD = 38 Rupees.

India is overwhelmingly a cash-based society. Very few merchants anywhere in the country accept credit cards. So **expect to pay cash for everything**.

First, we recommend that you **bring from home at least \$100 USD** (or equivalent currency) in cash. Do not bring bills larger than \$20, because money exchangers might consider them to be counterfeit (there's only a small chance of this, but it's one less hassle you can easily avoid).

While in India, the best way to get cash is to use an **ATM machine**. ATM's dispense money in Indian Rupees. There are ATM's in most towns even in rural areas.

If you need **fast cash from home**, your family can send you instant cash using services like Moneygram ([www.moneygram.com](http://www.moneygram.com)) or Western Union ([www.westernunion.com](http://www.westernunion.com)), with Moneygram by far the cheaper option. If you do not need the money in a timely manner, have your family make a deposit at your bank account back home, then you can withdraw the money in cash using your ATM card.

For **spending money** during your trip, count on spending \$5-\$10 per day. The actual amount can vary considerably, depending on factors such as:

- Your daily commuting costs between your host family and volunteers job
- How often you buy meals outside your host family
- Whether you buy / use a mobile phone
- Extra sightseeing you choose to do
- Shopping for clothes, toiletries, souvenirs

You can **exchange your cash** for Rupees at the airport, as well as at banks and private money-changers on the street. Ask your Program Coordinator to find a bank or a reputable private money-changer.

We do not recommend **travelers checks** because it can be very difficult to find banks where you can cash them, and the process is often time-consuming. Instead, Visa has a prepaid card that acts as an ATM card and debit card, but is not tied to any bank account. You should also bring at least one **credit card** to use for emergencies, such as cash advances.



## Hot Climate

Bangalore is very hot and humid year-round. Temperatures can reach 100 F (37 C) in some of our volunteer areas. You must take care on a daily basis to stay hydrated and avoid the sun as much as possible. If you become severely dehydrated, you might need to take oral rehydration salts. You will rarely find air-conditioning in India (unless you stay at an upscale hotel), but the temperature cools down considerably after sunset, so it is comfortable sleeping.

Tips on handling the heat:

- Stay hydrated daily with water
- Wear a hat outside
- Wear loose-fitting clothes made from breathable fabrics
- If you exercise, do so at sunrise
- Do not sunbathe
- Use sun block if you will be outside for long periods

..Symptoms of dehydration:

- Restlessness and irritability
- Sunken eyes
- Dry mouth and tongue
- Increased thirst
- Skin goes back slowly when pinched

## Culture Shock

You have probably heard the term “culture shock”, but what is it exactly? Webster’s Dictionary defines it as “a sense of confusion and uncertainty sometimes with feelings of anxiety that may affect people exposed to an alien culture or environment without adequate preparation.”

Of all of our host countries, **India probably has the most culture shock for visitors.** One of our favorite sayings is that India is the only place on Earth where you can see what it’s like to visit another planet.

Some examples of culture shock in India:

- You will have to share road space with cattle, goats, and stray dogs
- Prepare for the worst traffic gridlock you’ve ever seen
- Beggar children accost you from every angle, at every hour of the day/night.
- Taxi drivers and vendors never tire of asking you to patronize them.

- The smells of India will likely stay with you for a long time, with its mix of food spices, car exhaust, rotting garbage, flowers, body odor, etc.
- Vehicles honk horns constantly and loudly
- Roads and streets are often half-built, very treacherous to navigate
- The heat and humidity are often unbearable
- Pushing and shoving is normal in any queue, such as for train tickets

Please understand: **You are in a different country now**, one that has cultural practices, life experiences, needs, infrastructure (lack of), and a worldview that can be very different to the ones you are used to. You can either fight this type of reality or **learn to adapt to it**. We strongly suggest the latter. You have to accept the responsibility that comes with being a stranger in a strange land.

How can you handle culture shock?

- Be humble and respectful
- Observe & Listen
- Be Inquisitive
- Ask Questions
- Do not judge
- Do not act offended by comments or questions
- Offer your help
- See yourself in others
- Smile

## Saving the World

It is admirable that you want to have a positive impact on people's lives in India. After all, that should be why you signed up to volunteer in India, and that is why Cosmic sends volunteers there.

But please understand: **You will not “save the world” during your trip to India.** Or on any trip abroad, for that matter. If you even have the phrase “save the world” in your vocabulary, you are in for a rude awakening in India and your stay will be filled with major disappointment and disillusionment.

A typical pattern of some foreign volunteers is to show up in the local community, see an endless number of problems to be solved, start to make elaborate plans to solve those problems, work feverishly on executing those plans – then, ultimately experience a great deal of frustration when they realize that they have taken on too much, too quickly. Neophytes to traveling abroad can feel this even more intensely.

Our advice for you is to “work small.” As Chinese Buddhism says, “The sage does not attempt anything big.” Focus your efforts in India on one person, one project at a time, because those small successes lead to big accomplishments **over time**.

For example, if you are at an orphanage, simply focus on giving the children your time, your caring, and love. Yes the orphanage might need a new roof, or more books, or even medicines for the children – and you can help out with those projects if you wish; but focus first on the kids and making them feel loved.

## Living With Your Host Family

One of the most rewarding, challenging, and meaningful experiences of your time in India is likely to be the time you spend living with your host family. You are encouraged to cultivate the habit of listening and observing, rather than merely hearing and seeing. Be sensitive to the feelings of others and enjoy the company of people with different life experiences! Here are few more tips to help you prepare for your Indian living experience.

- One of the best ice-breakers with host families is to share with them photos from home – of you, your family, school office, neighborhood, pets, city, etc. Many Indians are interested in foreigners' lives, so we would encourage you to share pictures and stories of your life at home.
- Our host families will treat you as another member of the family, which means you will pick up after yourself, keep your area neat, and help out with the cooking and cleaning when appropriate.
- Many Indian families have several generations living in the same household. Children in India, like children anywhere, can be both adorable and a handful, so try to maintain your patience with them in order to integrate smoothly in the household.
- Please advise your family before you invite anyone to the house. Your family will really appreciate your courtesy.
- If you make plans to go out for an evening, please advise your family and make arrangements to get home and back into the house. They may express some worry that you're going out at night. Try not to be offended, they are just concerned about your safety. They will likewise encourage you to go out with family members, coworkers, or friends, so that you are not out alone at night.
- If you make plans to travel out of town, please let your family know where and for how long. If possible, give them a contact name, address, and phone number.
- Keep items of value, such as cameras, cash, and passport locked in your luggage.
- Please use your own toiletries and towels.
- Try to learn at least a few words of your host family's first language – whether it's Hindi or one of the dozens of other languages in India. Your family will absolutely love to help you learn and practice, especially the children. Don't feel shy – they will totally appreciate your willingness to learn and speak their language.
- Your host family will gladly boil water for you for safe drinking.
- Laundry is often done by hand in India. It is usually done by the women of the household, but your offer to help will most likely be welcomed by your host family.
- Always wash your own undergarments.

## Volunteer Work & Schedule

Our programs in India are individually-based as well, meaning that you will often be the only volunteer at your organization. The programs are sometimes unstructured with fluid or altogether non-existent schedules. This is due to cultural norms of India as well as the organizations where our volunteers are placed.

You must be a resourceful, self-starter who can jump in on day one and start to contribute. For example, do not be surprised if you walk into the orphanage the first day and no one says a word to you about what you should be doing. Before you leave home, ask us what supplies you might bring from home, such as sports equipment or art supplies for the kids

Generally speaking, your work schedule will be Monday through Friday, from 9am to 4pm. If there are slow times at your volunteer job, please speak to your supervisor for guidance – but do not be surprised if they do not offer much direction. Also speak to your Program Coordinator for guidance.

Do not take it personally if your work colleagues are indifferent to you. Simply work hard, put the time in, and have a great attitude.

## Food

As you probably know, Indian food can be very spicy. Your host family and even restaurants will tone down the spices upon request. Our vegetarian volunteers are easily accommodated in India, as vegetarian meals are common. You will find lots of rice, breads, greens, beans, and a variety of vegetables and fruits. For flesh eaters, you will find lamb, chicken, and fish on the menu frequently. Keep in mind that Hindus do not eat beef, Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol, and Sikhs do not eat beef.

For **street food**, you will find an endless number of vendors selling all types of food. As the New York Times writes, “The iconic street food of Bangalore is chaat, a variety of snacks that are meant to deliver a rave of tastes and sensations to the tongue, from crunchy to soft, tart to hot and sweet. The word is derived from the verb to lick.”

For drinks, **bottled water** can be found in shops and restaurants all over India. For soft drinks, you will find Coke, Fanta Orange and Sprite everywhere. You normally have to drink the soft drink at the shop because the shop returns the bottles to the bottler.

Do not be surprised if you **lose weight** in India. A variety of factors can contribute to this, like decreased appetite in the hot climate, lots of walking, lack of western fast food, and the fact that you might find Indian food unappealing.

## Religion

Religion permeates daily life in India. Hinduism is the predominant religion, accounting for 80% of the population. The second largest is Islam at 13%. The rest of the population are Christian, Buddhist, and Sikhs.

Rituals, worship, and other religious activities are very prominent in an individual's daily life. Religion is also a principal organizer of social life. You will find that many families have religious shrines in their houses where they leave offerings of food and flowers and burn incense. Also, you will often see statues of Hindu gods in shops and on the street.

You may be lucky enough to be in India during one of their many religious festivals, which are widely observed and hold great importance for Indians. Some of the most popular Hindu are Diwali, Ganesh Chaturthi, Holi, Durga puja, Ugadi, Dussehra, and Sankranthi/Pongal.

Note that religious observances are becoming less common in Indian society, particularly among young urban-dwellers.

## For Women Travelers

As a female visitor in India, you are likely to experience unwanted attention from men. Fortunately, the level of this in India is relatively low compared to many other countries. However we still want you to be aware that it does exist in India. The sexual attention will usually amount to staring/leering. Very rarely will there be inappropriate touching or actual assault. If you visit a beach, you will find that Indian men like to visit the beach to ogle foreign women in bikinis.

Keep in mind that you are not at home and that different rules apply. Women generally play a submissive role to men in India. A woman who acts like a man will not be respected. Men you meet may misinterpret your appearance, body language, or simple presence as invitations to approach you. Even a smile to a stranger may be misunderstood. You will need to modify your behavior in order to avoid unwanted attention.

Here are some tips on avoiding unwanted attention:

- Do not wear skimpy clothes
- Some women wear a “wedding ring” and say they’re married
- Never admit that you’re traveling alone. Tell people that your boyfriend or husband will be along shortly to join you
- Steer the conversation in another direction by asking questions – about local culture, politics, news

- Use humor to diffuse the situation
- If the man persists, be very direct and firmly tell him to stop, and be specific
- Walk in a group at night
- If you go to nightclubs, go with a group of friends
- Do not go to a secluded area or hotel/apartment with a man you do not know well

### Street Smarts

- Learn some basics about India before you arrive:
  - India's Prime Minister is Manmohan Singh (2004 – )
  - Population is 1.13 billion
  - Life expectancy is 60 years
  - India was a British colony until 1947
- Hotel Tips:
  - Hotels require you to leave the key at the front desk when you're out
  - Many require you to pay the bill at check-in
  - Room rates are usually fixed
  - It is acceptable to ask to see the room before you decide to book it
  - There is rarely hot water
  - Water often runs out, especially at night
- Buy a small flashlight when you arrive (cost around \$1). Use it to walk around rural areas at night and around your house when the power goes out.
- Bring a compact mirror from home or buy one in India, because your accommodations might not have any mirrors, even in the bathroom.
- Be sure to visit the outdoor markets throughout the country. They are wonderful places to see different people as well as products people sell
- Be very careful with your bags in markets and crowded streets
- Be prepared to wash your own laundry, especially your own undergarments
- Men urinate in public just about anywhere – side of the road, alleys, etc.
- Bargaining is expected in markets.
- Always ask someone before taking their photo or video
- Make sure you have small bills/change for snacks/water from street vendors.
- “Bollywood” is the term used to describe India's cinema industry.

### Romance

Getting involved romantically during your trip, whether with a fellow volunteer or local Indian, can be a complicated and outright dangerous thing. There is the risk of pregnancy as well as STD's like HIV. If you do become involved and have sex, always use a condom. Also keep in mind the social aspects of romance, especially if you are involved

with a Indian. There is definitely a pronounced double-standard against women. Women generally play a submissive role to men. Showing affection in public is generally not acceptable.

### **Mobile Phones**

We strongly encourage you to have a mobile phone in India. This can be a phone you bring from home or a phone you purchase in India.

- You can bring a phone from home, but the phone must be “unlocked.” Most mobile phones from America are purposely locked by the carriers and will not work in India.
- For locked phones not from America, you can take the phone to shops in India who will “unlock” the phone for a fee of \$5-\$10 USD.
- With an unlocked phone, you just need to buy a SIM card in India. The SIM card will have a local India telephone number
- New mobile phones in India start at around \$30
- SIM cards are bought separately and cost about \$10 USD
- It is best to buy the SIM card at the airport, from Airtel
- Mobile phone usage in India is mostly pay-as-you-go
- You buy phone credits (“units”) from street vendors and phone shops
- Incoming calls are free – including incoming international calls
- Note about landlines: Your host family will probably have a landline which you should give to your family back home. Incoming calls are free on the landline.

### **Family and Friends Calling You from Home**

Your folks back home will be able to call you either at your host family or on your mobile phone. They can use their landline phone to direct dial your India number. However unless they have an “international” phone service plan, direct-dialing can get very expensive. We recommend instead that they buy prepaid phone cards from a company like Nobelcom. Another option – one that we recommend – is for them to call you using an Internet phone service like Skype or Yahoo. The connections are much clearer this way, and it's usually slightly cheaper than calling from landline phones.



### **Giving Out Your Contact Information**

You will meet a lot of people during your stay, even if you are staying only one week. Locals will frequently ask for your contact information, so that they can stay in touch with you after you return home. In our experience, these requests are genuine and innocent, and even if you give them your information, you will never hear from 99% of them. One way to manage this situation is to carry business (calling) cards that you can give out, that have your name, email address, country and telephone number. You can get 250 **free** customizable business cards with Vista Print ([www.vistaprint.com](http://www.vistaprint.com)) which ships worldwide. Many locals, especially children, will be very excited to have a calling card of a foreigner. If someone gives you their contact information and you promise to contact them – follow-through and do it.

### **Local Transportation**

#### **By Road:**

Most people travel by road in and around Bangalore. The Bangalore area has a staggering 11 million motor vehicles, the most of any metro area in the world. Buses are the most popular means of transportation for travel within Bangalore, followed by private vehicles then auto-rickshaws, taxis, rapid transit system and railways. The auto-rickshaws are three-wheeled motorized vehicles that are noisy and smelly, but if you hire one, you will have to haggle for the price of the fare (even though they have meters).

#### **By Train:**

Some say that a visit to India would not be complete without at least one ride on a train. Rail transport is mostly used for long-distance travel in India. Almost all rail operations are run by state-owned Indian Railways. Train travel is safe, cheap and (in AC classes) comfortable. Even long distances such as Bangalore to Bombay can be covered more time-effectively than flying, using overnight sleeper trains.

#### **By Air:**

If you want to fly to other cities around India, there are very good domestic airlines in India that are safe and run on time. A partial list includes Kingfisher, SpiceJet, Air Sahara, Air Deccan, Paramount Airways and Indian Airlines

#### **Local Transportation Costs:**

Cosmic Volunteers pays for: Airport pickup, Transport to volunteer location / host family, and Transport during Introduction to India & Volunteer Work

Volunteer pays for: Daily travel between the host family and volunteer job, Return transport to airport, Any sightseeing excursions

### Internet

- Internet connections are often slow, usually dial-up speed
- Very few households have Internet access in India
- Internet cafe's are available in most towns, even in rural areas
- Internet access typically costs US\$.50 per hour
- Finding free (or any) wireless access for your laptop is not likely
- Strongly consider creating a new email address (like Yahoo or Gmail) to be used only during your trip. Before you leave home, forward all emails from your regular email account to this one. The reason is security – because you will be using public computers, you want to avoid password snatchers gaining access to your true personal email account.

### Bringing Your Laptop

- Feel free to bring your laptop to India, but understand that – as mentioned in the “Internet” section above – you have a small chance of finding a wireless connection.
- If you do bring your laptop to take notes or show people photos you have, we urge you to buy a local **surge protector** in India to protect your battery and hard drive.
- Do not keep any **sensitive information** on your laptop in case of theft, such as your bank account information, passwords, etc.
- India is a very **dusty environment** even in large cities, so cover your laptop at all times to protect it from damage.
- Protect the laptop from excessive banging as you travel around India.

### News on India

- [in.news.yahoo.com](http://in.news.yahoo.com)
- [www.hindustantimes.com](http://www.hindustantimes.com)
- [news.google.co.in](http://news.google.co.in)

### Parcels/Letters

You can also send and receive parcels and letters via the post office. Parcels/letters usually take 7-14 days to reach India. When sending parcels/letters from India, do not use India's postal system – use an international carrier instead like DHL or UPS because it's safer. Also, take the parcel to the office unsealed, as the customs officer may want to inspect the contents. Caution: Your family/friends should NOT send anything valuable by post.

## How Your Program Fee Is Used

Your Program Fee is used in India for:

- Expenses for Program Coordinator
- Your hotel accommodations
- Your airport pickup
- Transportation / Meals for you and Coordinator during orientation
- Meals / Accommodations at Host Family Fee
- Regular donations to local organizations where volunteers work

The remaining portion of your Program Fee is used by our US office for:

- Salaries for staff
- Recruiting volunteers
- Answering phone calls and emails during normal business hours
- Preparing volunteers for their trips
- Providing 24/7 support
- Developing and maintaining our website
- Legal and accounting services
- Office expenses like Internet access and phone bills
- Travel expenses for our staff to visit project sites

## Donations

Cosmic Volunteers will neither ask nor expect you to make any donations of any kind for any purpose (like money, medical supplies, clothes, books, etc). All of the parties we deal with in India are informed of this policy, including Program Coordinators, host families, and the organizations where you do your volunteer work.

If you decide to donate:

- **Do not give cash.** Buy materials instead, so that you know exactly how the funds will be used.
- **Buy the materials in India.** Things like flash cards and books might be biased or entirely irrelevant to the local culture. Things like medicine and medical supplies might be beneficial, but local organizations probably do not have the money to buy more supplies when yours run out; or the materials might not even be available locally.

### At the End of Your Program

At the end of their programs, our volunteers sometimes take time to travel around India for extra sightseeing. Otherwise, they travel back to Bangalore for their departing flight. You as the volunteer are responsible for the cost of your return taxi to the airport. If you wish to extend your stay with your host family, please discuss this directly with your host family. You must offer to pay them for housing you.

### Returning Home

When you return home from your trip, the “reverse culture shock” can be just as significant as the culture shock when you arrived in India.

- Returning home is often not a predictable process and can be more stressful than you anticipate.
- You might find yourself different than you were before you left home.
- You might feel like a “stranger” even among friends and family.
- You might get frustrated because it is difficult for others to know what your experiences have meant to you and how you might have changed.
- You may need significant time to return to your old roles and relationships.
- Be aware that things at home may have changed while you were away, both in the society and among friends and family. Even if you have heard about these events, the impact at home may not have been obvious.
- Your friends and family might notice that you have different patterns of behavior, speech, or new attitudes.
- Strange as it may seem to others, returnees often grieve for what they have left behind. You might be missing overseas friends, a stimulating environment, the feeling of being special, experiencing greater freedoms or responsibilities, or special privileges.

Some strategies for coping with returning home:

- Make contact with other volunteers who have successfully gone through the experience of returning home from abroad. This can help you through a difficult period of readaptation.
- Maintain personal and professional contacts with friends and institutions in India.
- Write and reflect about your experiences in a journal. This can be private or can be shared with friends, family, or the world (via a blog).
- Tell others your stories, show them your photos and videos.
- **On a medical note: If you become ill with a fever or flu-like illness up to one year after returning from India, seek immediate medical care and tell them you were in India. You could have malaria.**

**AND FINALLY . . .**

Make the most of every moment. Explore side streets. Take miracle walks. Perform random acts of kindness: buy fruit and share it, give flowers, pass out pens, coins and other useful and interesting things. Say hello. Smile. Take pictures. Share them. Learn about the depth of poverty. Count your blessings. Refuse to take things for granted. Give presents carefully. Play with everything. Share your toys. Blow bubbles. Spread laughter. Be kind to animals. Offer to help. Clean up your own mess without being asked. Clean up someone else's mess too. Ask questions. Answer questions. Collect addresses of people you meet. Send them postcards and email from home. Be aware that you are foreign and exotic. Hold babies. Giggle with children. Listen to old people. Be brave. Invite a dangerous stranger to dinner. Pay the bill. Learn to say thank you in the local language. Sing out loud, songs you sang as a child and songs children will teach you. Try something totally new. Don't just sight-see, sight-think. Donate energy. Spend time. Give hugs. Be thoughtful about donating, spending, and giving money. Support good work done by local people, buy a man a bike, pay a child's school tuition, offer a mother seed money and supplies to start a small business out of her home. Teach. Learn. Explore your own cultural perspective. Be subjectively aware. Touch the world. Allow the world to touch you. Come home safely . . . And remember, a true gift of seeing the world is to return where you started and see your place for the first time.