

LIVE FROM MUMBAI.

It has almost been a month since I arrived to Mumbai. On that day, a cab was taking me from the airport and we drove through immense traffic, through a huge fountain of the broken sewage system that spilled all over our car and my luggage that was tightened up to the top of the vehicle, through the shacks made of plastic...

The smells of the streets were almost unbearable and the heat along with nonstop car and motorcycle honking were pounding on my head like a heavy hammer... A terrifying thought went through my head: "Marianna, this is a grave mistake. You should have found a volunteering opportunity in Goa somewhere on a beach. How are you going to survive in Mumbai for a whole month?"

Now when the whole perspective was changed by accumulated experienced of this past month, I look at this choice with so much gratitude. This has definitely been an experience of a lifetime and I would not exchange it for anything (even for the beautiful sunsets in Goa).



Marianna doing check-ups at Niramaya's clinics

Being a volunteer with AVSAR and the Niramaya Health Foundation has changed my perspective at the whole concept of service. It is not just doing it. You can observe and change. Your mere presence can bring a change.

During the first week I went to several clinics in different slums of Mumbai, including the dumping grounds.

After my first visit to the dumping ground housing I wrote to my friend: "What can I tell you, my eyes are still wide open even though it has passed a few hours since then... But the most amazing part is that these people express no anger or envy when they see you walk and stare through their living... It feels totally safe."

I am yet to see so many happy, beautiful faces of children anywhere in the world as many as I've seen in the slums.

I do not understand Hindi almost at all but when it comes to seeing patients, it is just the verbal signs and observation that help me understand what is going on with them. It is an interesting experience.



Marianna assisting the doctor's at one of Niramaya's clinics

Many women will just sit there and tell me their life story without having an idea that I do not understand a single word, and I just nod :) After all, most people really just need for someone to listen to them, right?

One of the best parts about AVSAR experience is that you get to share it with a group of people who are here for the same reasons as you are and share similar ideas about the world: being courageous, adventurous, an idealist, and willing to drop the comfort of daily living in the "civilized world" to come here and receive through doing service. It has been such a fun, beautiful experience living in one apartment with all six of us, sharing our days, discussing our issues, exchanging opinions and, certainly, having fun.

Mumbai is so overwhelming compared to any major city I've ever been to. It is full of cars and people and the pollution is absolutely toxic. Somehow, however, this city grows into you and this is a common opinion I am beginning to share. And the most important thing we all receive here is self-growth.

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