Making connections and learning about India

Selection

In January 2025 I applied to the South West Girlguiding INTOPS (International Opportunities) programme hoping to be selected for one of the three trips taking place in 2026. This involved an application form, a county level selection weekend and finally a regional selection weekend. At this final weekend we found out the three trips on offer to successful candidates were Sweden, Croatia and India. I selected India as my first choice because I thought it would be the most interesting and present the biggest learning opportunity for me. I was so pleased a week later to find out I had been selected and had been given my first choice. It was very scary at first because of how far away India is and also the amount of money I needed to fundraise to be able to go, but despite this I was really happy and excited.

Preparation

I then spent the next nine months fundraising the £3600 required and preparing for the trip. In terms of fundraising, I applied to organisations (like yourselves) for grants, I did a cake sale, sold my art and ran a chocolate bingo night. As a group (of 16 girls and 4 leaders) we attended two pre weekends during which we talked about the trip, learning a bit about Indian culture, what to expect and to get to know each other.

Itinerary

The trip involved a one-week Brave Space Programme at Sangam, Pune, which is one of the Girl Guiding and Girl Scouts World Centres. This was a leadership programme to develop skills and to work with a local community partner. Followed by 4 nights travelling around the Golden Triangle in Northern India.

Arriving

We arrived in Mumbai on Monday 10 August. We had a tour of Mumbai where I got my first impression of India. It was so different to England and unlike any city I had visited before. It was very hot, the streets were very busy, crowded and noisy. We stopped at a couple of main sights. One was the Gandhi Museum in the house he stayed in whilst there. We met a lot of school children there, they were learning about Gandhi in preparation for Indian Independence Day. We travelled to Sangam and arrived that evening.

Brave Space Programme



The Brave Space Programme started with a welcome ceremony in which we were blessed. It was interesting to see the traditions of India and amazing to be welcomed in that way.

There were three main parts to the programme and the trip as a whole. Making connections with other girl guides and the local community, leadership skills, and learning about Indian culture, art and history.

Brave Space Programme - Making Connections



There were two other groups on the programme with us, one also from the UK and the other from Canada. So not only were we learning about the culture of India but also Canada. The first day focussed on Guiding and Scout connections. Meaning Guides and Scouts from the local area (Pune) came to Sangam to meet us and us to meet them. We did challenges learning about each country, watched performances from the local girl guides and swapped badges.

Later in the week we worked with some of Sangam's community partners, splitting of into groups each going to a different charity. I visited a school created by the India Sponsorship Committee. This is an organisation which supports disadvantaged children through sponsorship programs that transform all aspects of their life for the better – education, personal relationships, skills, nutrition, and more.

This school provided a vital education base and home for some children. At the school we taught them games and played with them and they asked us lots of questions about where we were from. We also had a tour of the school which gave me a picture of how the children live. The children demonstrated some of the scout skills and we taught them some of ours. We got to know each other and sang songs.

Brave Space Programme - Leadership

The second theme of the week was leadership which was something that ran through the entire week but specifically workshops were held where we got into our patrol and answered questions about scenarios where leadership is important and had group discussions about how we would handle situations as young women. Also during these workshops we would speak in front of the rest of the group to become more confident in public speaking.

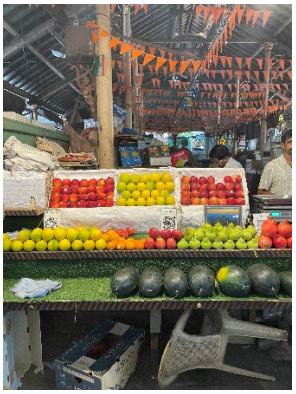
Brave Space Programme - Culture, art and history

The final theme of the Brave Space Programme was learning about the culture, art and history of India. We did this both in Sangam but also through exploring the city of Pune. Rikshaws took us to markets of all kinds (food, jewellery, clothes etc.), spice shops and museums. We bought fabrics to have Sarees tailored as well as refuelling at Indian restaurants. We were also invited into an Indian home because to have guests is a blessing. We were shown around the home and learnt about their spices and how they flavour their food.

The 15 August was India's Independence Day. We had a ceremony and that night was cultural night where we learnt not only about India's rich culture but also other cultures from around the world (America, Argentina, Sweden, Canada, Tanzania) because the volunteers working at Sangam are from all around the world. We ate food, sang songs and were taught dances.

On the final night we learnt and participated in Rangoli, henna, saree tying, drumming and then has a traditional Maharashtrian Jevan meal, which we sat on the floor using our hands to eat, the food was amazing!







The Golden Triangle

After the Brave Space Programme, we left Sangam for the airport (by Rikshaw) to fly up to the Golden Triangle for a few days of sightseeing in New Delhi, Agra and Jaipur.

We visited the Taj Mahal (Agra) at sunrise, and it was breathtaking because of its beauty but also the love story behind it. Equally the Jama Masjid (Islamic Mosque), the Red Fort (Agra) and City Palace (Jaipur), were all stunning and we explored them for hours. I learnt about culture through visiting markets. I saw artists at work in a marble shop and jewellery shops learning about the processes they use and saw their final products.





My experience

India was an incredible learning experience that I will never forget. I made so many new friends and learnt not only about India but also about myself. I built confidence and was proud at how far I had travelled without family with people I didn't know very well. This trip made me excited for the future. I thoroughly enjoyed my time at Sangam and it was so fun to explore the local community bit by bit. The second week was equally as fun and I learnt even more! I have no regrets regarding the trip only that it could have been longer because I feel there is so much still to learn about India. In conclusion I am so happy to have been a part of the trip and extremely grateful I was given the opportunity.