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PUDUCHERRY, India — The first sound in the morning is crows, right at 5. Then we hear waves off the Bay of Bengal slapping the shore. In the garden, a man meditates while walking quickly over the lawn of the ashram guest house in the dark. Along the shore, other men pace the beach in the silver jetty light. Fishing boat lanterns like stars ride the black sea south to north.

My wife and I have come to this old French comptoir (formerly Pondichéry) in southeast India mostly for the yoga. The classes used to be held in one of the many parcels of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram scattered across the colonial city. But for this retreat, there's a new venue and to get there you have to be on Ajit Sarkar's bus by 5:45. There are 20 or so of us, nearly all from France.

Ajit, in his 70s now, grew up in this famous ashram with his parents, who went into the retreat founded and inspired by the yogi and guru Sri Aurobindo and his vision of universal consciousness and peace. In this idyllic world, Ajit learned everything from ballet to track to gymnastics, but especially yoga, a skill he has taught with acclaim for decades both in India and in France. His official retirement since 2003 is a fiction of contentment.

It's the school he's building that keeps him going, in addition to being in top form himself. We the chosen students, by contrast, can barely see straight in the shadowy dawn as the bus heads off through Puducherry. For the first few blocks the streets have French names: Rue Dumas, Rue Suffren, Rue Romain Rolland. Then we leave town and head south over fetid canals and clogged streams, through trash-heaped neighborhoods thumping with all-night Hindu festival music while men in dhotis stand around sipping tea out of plastic goblets. Cows with brightly painted red and green horns meditate in the middle of the road as we plunge into the lush Tamil Nadu countryside.

Vellai Thamarai: Imagine going to a school named White Lotus. It's not yet entirely finished but is supposed to be by January. Nearly every villager in Cinna Kattupalayam lines the road to greet our bus with cries of hello and bonjour. On a Monday morning, the children are beside themselves at the prospect of going to school. There are enough smiles for a thousand mornings.

Much of Ajit's retirement money flows into this project, starting with a main building for the nursery, kindergarten and elementary school classes. One nursery and three kindergarten classes started in June, the same month the school was inaugurated. Several other buildings figure in the master plan, facilities for students through high school, a cultural center for teaching yoga and alternative medicine, a workshop for adults and a dispensary. But there's still the big bank loan hanging over the first building, a neat brick quadrangle whose doors

have opened to a few dozen village children so far.

We take our yoga classes on the roof of the new school, under a tall thatched structure with open sides. Most of the people in the assembly know their Hatha-style yoga; others stumble a lot - but soon everyone gets into the flow, despite the great sensual distractions: banana groves to the north wavering in the gold sunlight; rice paddies to the east where a few dozen women bend weeding at daybreak; thick coconut trees to the west that invite the eye to enter and roam; and to the south, the village, overlain with teak, drumstick and casuarina trees, where cooking-fire smoke rises and every dog yaps at everything.

There's a blessed break around 9 to boat a couple of kilometers down a green stream, which takes us to the sea for an hour's swim in view of a towering blue Hindu temple. The coast here was struck hard by the tsunami in 2004. In the tiny Puducherry district alone about 600 lives were lost; in the surrounding state of Tamil Nadu about 8,000. But the 10-meter, or nearly 35-foot, waves didn't roll up to the future site of Vellai Thamarai, and the village was spared the worst.

By the time we return, school classes are under way and the air rings with voices of children shouting out their ABCs. The young Tamil teachers in dazzling saris instruct the little ones to greet the visitors as we fill the classroom doors and windows. A few of them are still crying for their parents who've left them for the day. One or two sleep soundly on mats, others sip warm milk and sugar, still others reach out to shake our hands.

Classes in Indian culture, taught by Ajit or his wife, Selvi, guide us through the thickets of marriage, life in the Aurobindo ashram, techniques of meditation and the Hindu pantheon. We discuss the future of the school, how the rice and bananas growing on adjacent fields help the bottom line, how funding from the government is sparse and how much the project depends on donors. The director of the school works without pay. He and the social worker and even the building superintendent follow the guiding principle of sharing the labor; many a midday found all of them squatting in the kitchen with the cooks snapping green beans or peeling onions and ginger. Hierarchy counts for nothing here; helping one another is everything.

It is a balanced community working toward the same goal: educating children to rise above a dirt-floor existence. Families of four in Cinna Kattupalayam get by on 125 rupees, or less than $3, a day. Most parents are agricultural laborers. A half day's weeding, from 6 a.m. to noon, in the rice paddy earns a woman about 60 rupees; men building the school make slightly more. Women carrying sand and bricks to the roof on their heads stop and watch the Westerners struggle with yoga and ask us to take their photos with our digital cameras. Later, we bring them nail polish, and paper and pens for their children.

In the afternoon the children continue their classes and the yoga initiates rest a while. Older

kids with siblings in the school come around after the city bus drops them off and query us about France and America, then pose for pictures and show off the yoga positions they've picked up. Selvi teaches a class in Indian music; others take a dance course and learn the precise, spine-defying steps of a classical south Indian art. All the culture notwithstanding, it's hard not to fall asleep in the thick heat and dream.

We were happy to have a couple of afternoons off toward the end of the two-week program, which gave us time to see Puducherry by day, best done by bicycle. I couldn't help thinking, wandering the French quarter, how much the place resembles New Orleans in summer: hot and muggy, but thick with colonial architecture and secret gardens. The various parts of the Aurobindo ashram are all worth visiting, from the crafts store to the main center where Sri Aurobindo and his venerated disciple, La Mère, are buried and around whose jasmin-covered tombs dozens meditate communally each day in a sea of sweet incense. Shopping along Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi streets, we find rock-bottom prices. Sundays bring a flea market along Gandhi at which you can find everything from toe rings to motherboards amid the zigzagging bikes and rickshaws with no mind for the ambulatory.

Our afternoons spent at Vellai Thamarai wind down through exercises to relax the body and mind, and then a regimental workout until 6, with Ajit pushing us all to the tips of our muscles. The school teachers and nurse come up and join us, which makes for a lot of laughter as Ajit tacks between French and English to keep everybody on their toes. But it's the tricky headstands that truly challenge us all, despite Ajit's reverent description of the ease with which Nehru practiced this healthy habit.

The short, brutish trip back to town is another unforgettable piece of India. Our bus passes others dangerously, and the others pass too: tons of steel packed with innocents hurtle straight at each other until the last second. It is an articulate game of chicken played out with nonstop honking but never any gesticulating and no vulgarities. Only the Westerners clutch their chests.

At day's end, there's no energy left for anything but a cold shower and a check of the seaside view. It might be 9 o'clock. Waves roll in. Men and women stroll the shore together, and now and then you can hear a bottle break. I picture the school, still not done, out there in the tropical dark, a drop in the ocean of all India's needs, but for all that it is everything.

As I fall into bed, I hear the innumerable crows. They go on late into the night, along with deep laughter of men and rusty strains of music and crackling volleys of firecrackers. Only much later, round about 3 a.m., does it truly get quiet: the only time, they say, that anyone in India can hear to think. I sit up. I listen, and it's like I've never listened before.