

# Helping students discover their passion

Living Routes is a U.S. based educational non-profit organization which brings American college students to Auroville every year on a 14 week study programme. What do the students do, what is the intention behind the programme and how does it relate to Auroville? Aurovilian and guests serving as staff and faculty for the Living Routes programme respond.

*How is the programme structured?*

**Ethan:** We do a three-week orientation where the students discover what Auroville is about, and introduce the programme - many of the students are in a traditional U.S. college programme and it's a very different format here. Then they do a five to six weeks internship when they work in an Auroville unit or work place. We call this 'service-learning' because during this time they contribute their work and time to the larger community.

*What choices do they have for internships?*

**Martin:** This time the options included Solitude Farm, WELL paper, Upasana, Rangoli, the Earth Institute bamboo project and AVRadio.

**Bindu:** What we are looking for are places with a strong mentor for the students. If possible, we also like the place of work to be connected in some way with sustainability. This we define in very broad terms: outer sustainability, intersubjective (working and living with others) and personal sustainability.

**Ethan:** During these six weeks we also teach the bulk of our seminars. In the mornings the students work in an Auroville unit and in the afternoons they have courses on topics like global and local sustainability, group dynam-

*How does this differ from a typical college course in the U.S.?*

**Ethan:** For one thing, we are together much of the time. We call this is our 'learning community': it's where we talk about not only the academic side of things but whatever else we are feeling or concerns us.

**Priya:** It's a much more integrated approach to education than you would find in a traditional American college. When you learn about environmental issues in Auroville, you also see how they directly affect people. The learning outside the classroom is huge. Also, the component of service makes it stand apart from most other programmes in the U.S.

**Bindu:** It's very much experiential education. We also consider it transformative. It's very challenging for these students, who have never left the U.S. and come from privileged backgrounds, to be suddenly thrown into 'Third World dynamics' and this can result in huge personal change. We believe each student has a unique gift to offer, so we are not looking at cramming people with knowledge. Rather, we're trying to be midwives of change in them.

**Ethan:** The spiritual aspect generally would not be part of a traditional academic course. We do yoga and meditation five days a week, we go on a one week meditation retreat and the students



The Living Routes team: Ethan, Priya, Bindu and Martin

*Some Aurovilians resent outside agencies bringing students for courses in Auroville because they feel the community is in some sense being 'used'. What is your response to this?*

**Martin:** I've received the same feedback from Aurovilians and I think they have a valid point to some extent. I think the Living Routes syllabus is great and the programme is fantastic. However, I feel it's a pity that this course is mainly run by outside faculty and that Auroville has not yet managed to come up with its own programme. The internships are crucial here, because this is when the students go out and interact with mentors and other Aurovilians, but it's not enough. So, as a next step, we have initiated a series of seminars on different aspects of sustainability on Saturday mornings which are open not only to Living Routes students but to all Aurovilians.

**Bindu:** This Integral Sustainability Seminar series, jointly offered by University of Human Unity, is moderated by Living Routes faculty. By bringing together Aurovilians working on different initiatives and by linking local initiatives in sustainability to the global context, we help Aurovilians to work towards more integrated solutions and also remind them that Auroville should not just focus on itself but try to creatively engage with the problems of the world.

**Martin:** I'm also concerned that the Living Routes students can become a separate entity in Auroville, that they can isolate themselves in a U.S. 'bubble'

**Ethan:** The Aurovilian inputs are crucial for the Living Routes course. If the Living Routes students don't get connected to India and Auroville, then what's the point? They could have learned the same things in the U.S.

**Bindu:** Personally, I would wish that rather than rich, bored tourists, young, enthusiastic students come to Auroville. It would be great if Aurovilians could develop their own educational programmes that would attract students. This would most likely result in a greater economic benefit for Auroville. There is some movement in this regard, but to be honest, none of the current educational initiatives have the rigour of an academic university in the West.

Study abroad in Auroville, an international community along the tropical coast of southern India dedicated to promoting human unity. Participate in an academic program that fosters collaborative inquiry, critical thinking, and dialogue while exploring daily awareness practices such as yoga, non-violent communication, and meditation. Through engagement with a holistic approach to world issues that encompasses inner, cultural, and outer processes, you broaden and deepen your understanding of sustainability issues. ... Empower yourself and learn to empower others through a process whereby what you learn is integrated with how you live.

*From the Living Routes website*

*From an interview by Alan*

# Open classroom

The Learning Community is a new initiative that consists of seven children, aged 10-12, and a group of adults with a larger group of ent

Monday morning. A beautiful thatched room in Botanical Garden. Inside, small groups of adults and children are scattered around, quietly reading or talking together, their heads bent close to the ground. When I approach they look up.

"Let's come together and tell Alan about the Learning Community," suggests someone. In a few moments I am in a circle and I'm facing these shining eyes.

"So, what is The Learning Community? How is it different from other schools?"

"We don't have a fixed schedule." "We meet once a month." "All the different ages are mixed together. We wash our own dishes." "Our class is a community."

Natasha picks up on the last point. "Tell him more about the open classroom. Whoever comes by. How it's open to whatever happens."

"The other day a scorpion spider came in," says Edén, "and we spent the whole morning looking at it. It was covered by pincers and he had a broken antenna."

"We try to connect a lot with nature," explains Priya. "Yeah, when we went to Johnny's we named the chickens." "Johnny also helped us make furniture and we learned to do things."

"For the 'Zoom'," says nine year old Zea. "I don't think we are 'using' it."

Auroville. Living Routes' ideals of community, sustainability and spirituality resonate with the Auroville vision. We want young people to be inspired by Auroville and Aurovilians. But more often than not, these young students are disappointed with Auroville when they see the gap between the ideal and the reality. For instance, our students use cycles and are shocked to see Aurovilians' reliance on motorized transport. And that "encounter" in itself is a valuable learning experience for both students and Aurovilians.

As for finances, apart from the boarding and lodging costs, staff salaries, payments to Aurovilian guest lecturers, Living Routes donates at least \$200 per student. It pays \$100 per intern to the places where interns work and, at the end of the course, each student gets \$100 to support any Auroville project which they wish. As Living Routes sends about 48 students a year, that's a considerable amount.

Living Routes also makes a donation towards tree-planting to offset the carbon emissions, particularly those connected with air-travel, and Living Routes has given donations to different Auroville projects in order to help them develop. Living Routes also began offering scholarships to Aurovilian youth three semesters ago. The second semester we had Vika, and this semester we have Karthik who have been living and working in Auroville for several years. We are hoping that more Aurovilian youth will take advantage of this opportunity.

*What inspires you to do this work?*

**Ethan:** I'm doing this job because I was a student on this programme many years ago and it had an amazing impact on my life; it really shifted my entire world-view. So my reason for being here is to help the students find their passion and help them incorporate that into their lives. I think what the programme can do for Auroville is to bring in this idealistic, challenging energy - which is what I hope the students bring - to help the community flush out new ideas.

**Bindu:** I do this programme because education is one of my passions and the interactions with the students and faculty helps me to grow. I enjoy interacting with students in their early twenties but that's an age-group that's missing in Auroville. For years, I was caught up in working directly for the development of Auroville, and now I find myself in a different phase of life-more than ever, I want to discover my *svadharma*, and currently this work seems to be a path toward this self-discovery.

*From an interview by Alan*



The open classroom in the Botanical Garden

The prospect of the Zoom made everybody in Auroville excited. "One day we went picking tamarinds and we had a Zoom," says Edén. "Some were really grumpy but some were happy. We had 100 and we only had to give him Rs 15 back."

# Training environment

On September 1st 2009, an ambitious initiative was launched in Auroville's Sadhana Forest: a 3-year programme with 16 participants from all over the world.

"Several issues led us to start this programme," says Avinash. "One was the perception that Auroville was a place where we need to share the knowledge we have in Auroville with others. The second was to pursue the idea of Auroville having a university in the future, and to see what that means in practical terms."

"We wanted to offer a long-term residential educational programme. Often courses offered in Auroville are 2-3 weeks, occasionally a month long. But a medium time-frame allows only a shallow depth; one can't really get into the subject like giving a teaspoon of everything, but if you want a bigger portion, you'll have to go somewhere else. But we have the material available here, why not disseminate it on a more diverse and more in-depth level?"

"So we started. We selected 35 people from all over the world, more than two thousand volunteers who worked over the years at Sadhana Forest, and invited them to join the programme. We selected 16 people as we had noticed that they have potential for leadership. From these, 16 people jumped on board. They are very diverse. The youngest is the oldest 35. Four are from India; the others come from Macedonia, Australia, France, Germany, United States, the United Kingdom and Ireland. They have different skills. Some have worked in environmental conservation; others have managed a restaurant and so on. They live and work in Sadhana Forest free of cost - this means free food and stay, and some get also a pocket money."



## Vika's experience

Vika was the first Auroville youngster to be offered a scholarship to participate in a Living Routes programme. This is an extract from an essay she wrote at the end of the programme.

"Being part of the Living Routes Program has led me to understand the work that is being done in Auroville a lot better. I have been given an opportunity to look at everything from a different perspective, almost as an outsider, observing and learning. In that process I

have realized that I know so little about my own home town and the people who live here. There is so much to do and so much to be part of that it excites me and also scares me a little. Besides the spiritual aspect of our personal development (the main emphasis of us being here in Auroville) there are so many of us here that give themselves to bring change to the course of humanity, which I only became aware of during the programme. This can be a great opportunity for any youngster, seeking some connection with the earth and life itself, or a chance to discover new knowledge."

ics and body-mind-spirit. The three philosophical 'pillars' of the course are spirituality, community and the environment, which we see as totally inter-related. The fourth pillar is the practical application of sustainability, which is their service learning.

After the six week internship we go travelling together in India for two to three weeks. When we return, the students break up into small groups and live in different Auroville communities for two weeks. This is their chance to experience Auroville on their own terms. This part of the programme hasn't always worked well in the past because there wasn't much interaction between the students and other members of the community they are living in. To deepen the experience we've tried to find mentors in these communities who will interact with the students and teach them something worthwhile. The last week of the 14 week course is spent in gathering all the learning together.

**Bindu:** While the course falls into these different segments, we don't separate the learning. We stress the merging of personal and community and environmental sustainability.