

Working in India

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India is a very large country with a truly staggering variety of cultures, religions, customs, climates and peoples. It is thus almost impossible to state anything about India with absolute certainty; for every perceived rule there is an exception. India is also changing very rapidly at least in the urban areas so even the perceived rules are changing let alone the exceptions.

Registration

It is impossible to register as a veterinary surgeon without fulfilling a residential condition, currently five years, even though MsRCVS are educationally eligible for registration. Advice received from sources close to the central Government have suggested that in most cases no objections will be raised provided the volunteer veterinary surgeon deals only with animals that would otherwise not receive veterinary treatment. In short this means that provided the volunteer does not have an impact on the livelihood of local practitioners no one is likely to be concerned, and it may be best to just get on with vetting without creating too much fuss trying to register.

Visas

Britishers need a visa to entry India obtained from the Indian High Commission. The standard tourist visa is for 6 months. Short term volunteers are probably best not mentioning their intention to volunteer and enter under a tourist visa. Longer term volunteers should stress the voluntary nature of their visit. If 'work' is mentioned this confuses the issue somewhat. One can not do 'voluntary work' as the High Commission can not cope with this oxymoron.

Longer term visas require registration at the local Foreigners' Registration Office (FRO) which is a tedious but apparently necessary, and not too long winded exercise. On occasion such registration requires a test to prove freedom from infection with HIV.

Arrival

In common with many countries the new visitor arriving by air, and often tired, is easy prey for many scams especially by taxi drivers. Delhi airport is getting much better for this and government or police run pre-paid taxi booths, railway booking offices and hotel booking agencies are available, but often not prominently.

Trains in India are very full all of the time so pre-booking is required for most onward journeys by rail. From Delhi an efficient bus/coach service operates to many adjacent states. Increasing liberalisation of internal air travel means travel by aeroplane is now an efficient and competitive option, though some internal airlines use a two-tier price system where westerners pay substantially more than locals. Regional airports and railway stations are more prone to scams, and can be quite trying.

Language

All professional colleagues in India will have been educated in English. It may however take time for the inexperienced ear to understand local English. Such understanding will develop with time. South India is much more fluent in English than the Hindi belt of the north. There are a number of official languages, and scripts, many of them regional so that even Indian citizens from one area can not always understand their fellow citizens from other places. English, amongst educated people is the unifying language. Making the effort to learn, and write in Hindi or other local script, is very much appreciated. A degree of lateral thinking helps with communication and a smile is a smile in any language; and Indians smile and laugh very readily.

Time

Time is a different concept in India. Everything is done at a slower, more relaxed pace to which the volunteer will have to adapt. Things seldom have the urgency westerners put on them. For making arrangements for appointments etc it is often easier to ask whether the arrangements are in 'Indian time' or 'English time' as this avoids much unnecessary rushing about and then frustrated waiting on the part of the volunteer.

Professional standing

There is a much greater gulf between veterinary surgeons and their lay staff in India than in the west. A volunteer can break this down with time. The profession in India is not held in the same regard as it is in the UK. Most vets are only vets because they could not get into medical school and this professional gulf is maintained. A local vet may earn about five times what lay staff earn. Being a veterinary surgeon does not abolish the caste of the person.

Professional education

This is still based on a very old-fashioned syllabus and with the aim of producing vets capable with food production animals. The whole education system in India appears to be based on learning rather than understanding and this is reflected with vets too. Hierarchical considerations also mean that many vets are much less involved with their patients than UK colleagues are used to: handling animals, giving treatments etc is what lay staff is for. Do not assume that a local colleague knows how to do even apparently straightforward things; and certainly do not assume that he will admit he does know.

Professional Life

One is often the expert even in subjects one knows little about. Basic principals, extrapolation from more familiar species and a degree of 'gung-ho' spirit suffice in these situations. Many of the things one learnt at college as being impossible to do without a battery of equipment can be successfully attempted under field conditions. If there's no alternative, have a go.

Caste

One can not work in north India without being aware of caste. South India and in cities it is less of a issue. To a westerner it is hard not to see caste as a particularly odious discriminatory, unjust, system perpetuated by advantaged bigots. Westerners, as non-Hindus, are theoretically 'untouchable' but in practice Westerners cut through caste, and this can be used to break down local caste perceptions. In my experience the lower the caste the warmer will be the welcome, the more friendly, sharing and kindly will be people. Those who have least share the most in ways which are humbling. Be aware of generous shows of welcome and friendship by poor and low caste people as these may be out of proportion to what the host can afford. Caste is unrelated to wealth and to the social usefulness of one's job.

Supplies

With an increasingly open economy most personal items can be acquired in India, often considerably cheaper than in the west. This includes many medicines, for which prescriptions are usually not required. It is useful both personally and professionally to obtain copies of the Indian medical and veterinary equivalents of the British National Formulary as this will enable the volunteer to source many medicines of professional use.

Everyday Life

Expect to have the occasional day when you need to retreat from India's full force. Try a local tourist hotel; friends, the local beer etc. Indians are very gregarious and dislike being alone; this can be used to one's advantage as a short walk from most tourist or picnic sites will be a delightful deserted corner for one to escape to, though ladies should perhaps be more circumspect.

But above all have fun; it will always beat anal glands, TB testing or castrating rabbits.