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Global Lens: Adapting to Life Across Cultures

The first post in our [series](#) comes from **Michael Goodwin**, Project Coordinator for the **Culture & Incentives Project**, which, distinctively, spans several countries (Ghana, India, Philippines, Peru).

Read on:

In 1519, a gust of wind bore Magellan out of the Mediterranean and, armed with blind faith and the rudimentary navigation technology available at the time, he plunged headlong into the dangers and vagaries of the wider world. My own round-the-world project has involved few of the discomforts and mortal risks taken by Magellan. Nevertheless, it shares with his voyage a desire to explore the world while replacing his blind faith with a systematic, objective approach to understanding cross-cultural relationships in an interdependent world.

10 months ago, I boarded a plane on a cold winter day in New York. When the doors opened on the other side of the Atlantic, Ghana greeted me with tropical heat. As the first stop on a multi-country project intended to study cultural differences and their impact on firm productivity, Ghana was a useful introduction to the challenges and joys of fieldwork. Life in Accra is difficult to predict, making the average day at once complicated and interesting. A power outage may derail plans for a day of data collection or a traffic jam in the city may prevent research participants or surveyors from arriving on time (or at all). Even finding drinking water and showering, mindless tasks one rarely considers in the US, require the newcomer and the Ghanaian alike to economize their cognitive resources. An impromptu dance party or an unexpected invitation to a funeral represent the flip side of this coin, one in which the unpredictable can be either serendipitous or disruptive.



Fruit vendor in

Accra, Ghana. Photo credit: Michael Goodwin, IPA.

From Ghana, the flight to Kolkata, India invariably pauses amid Dubai's desert towers, jutting like blades of steel grass from the sandy monotony, before jumping onwards to the Bay of Bengal. The 16 million people who live in Kolkata are in constant, unavoidable contact with one another. At night, the streets are filled with slumbering families, many of whom are migrants from rural West Bengal and farther afield. By day, those same streets swarm with commerce, with chai-wallahs vying for rupees alongside magazine vendors and shoe shiners. Commutes can be physical battles involving a headlong charge onto a packed train or the contortions required to fit a 9th person into an already overflowing auto rickshaw. The crowds and constant motion of the city can be energizing or defeating, but Kolkata is never without the buzzing excitement of a massive city.

My eastward journey continued on to the Philippines, whose 7000 plus islands are home to 15 major languages and the world's sweetest mangoes. Cagayan de Oro (CDO), located in Northern Mindanao, was a sea change from Kolkata. It is a mid-sized city of perhaps 700,000, more navigable than Kolkata but as hot as Accra. CDO offers an interesting vantage point for observing the impact of rapid urbanization in least developed countries. It is a city with 3 malls, respectable by Filipino standards, but with an infrastructure more fitting of a city half its size. Just as the city's infrastructure has not met the demands of its population explosion, CDO's large and growing cohort of under-30s outpaces the availability of job opportunities. Creating fulfilling economic opportunities in CDO for this university educated, English-speaking population would staunch the outflow of talent to Manila and abroad and allow Northern Mindanao to thrive in its own right.

IPA matches its geographic reach, stretching time zones and continents, with a breadth of opportunities for rigorous evaluation and exploration. Having the opportunity to work across countries and offices has exposed me to both the challenges and the small pleasures of life in West Africa, South Asia, and East Asia. But more than hip live music, chicken rolls, or video karaoke, my experience in these countries has exposed me to the adaptations we all must make in order to provide our basic needs and aspire to our more complex wants. Just as in Ghana, life in India and the Philippines is idiosyncratic and difficult for an outsider to decipher. With time, however, the patterns become more apparent; the 10:00am bus that leaves at 11:30am becomes much more comprehensible.



Bustling street

in Cagayan de Oro, Philippines. Photo credit: Michael Goodwin, IPA.

It is the privilege of IPA field staff to learn the patterns and blend in as much as possible, while trying to understand how to adjust institutions - whether an MFI or a fertilizer program - so that they better meet the needs and particularities of the people who rely on them.

We've had several new [**Global Lens**](#) posts since Michael's first entry. [Check them out.](#)

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