

Svetha Venkatesh

## Close Encounters of the Wiko Kind



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I arrived at Wiko after having missed my connecting flight at Frankfurt and losing all my baggage. I was taken to my flat, which could be reached by climbing 80 steps (no elevator). It really was a beautiful flat, and worth the endless climbing over the next months.

Srini was already in Berlin at that time, and he showed me this magnificent office I was going to share with him. In fact it was so big that when we talked, we had trouble distinguishing what we said from the echoes. It was very different from the cluttered labs filled with wires, computers and equipment, and we were really quite ill-equipped to deal with problems of non-clutter.

The first few weeks were spent in understanding the systems in Berlin. Initially I was aghast that I could not walk up to the library and browse through books, but by the time I left, I was really enjoying this concept of getting books delivered to you! The library was a very useful resource, and I particularly enjoyed their help in seeking material.

There were many aspects of the Wiko year that I recall with fondness.

First there was the Tuesday seminar series. These seminars were always fun, both from the point of view of trying to understand the speaker, which was a challenge if you were from another discipline, and comprehending the one hour of debate that followed. It has been a long time since I went to such a multidisciplinary seminar series, and I found the whole process quite intriguing. Sometimes, I could neither understand the speaker nor the questions, and this was quite demoralising if the talk had been in English!

Then, there were the lunches. Roland remarked to me then when I first started at Wiko I would start fidgeting after 15 minutes, clearly

wanting to return to work. Well, after two months, he said that he noticed that I did not seem to care how long lunch took. I guess that says it all. Lunches were social events where we discussed further social rendezvous, so that we were forever in this endless social loop.

I recall the German classes as a blur of laughter and fun. Being in the beginner's class has several advantages, as we were under no pressure to be competent. We spent enormous amounts of time saying the simplest of things, and at the end, I admit I did know the grammar if not the vocabulary.

The walks in Berlin were truly wonderful. There were groups who explored different aspects. Susanna was perhaps the expert, who showed how to navigate the forest by reading nonexistent signs on trees, and the insides of courtyards we would not have dared to enter. And then there was the group who would try to repeat Susanna's walks without her and get lost. Robin showed us the incredible pictures in the lake behind our house. She also watched over the swan as it looked after its eggs in winter, completely convinced that the swan did not know what it was doing, and that the swan was going to starve to death guarding over eggs that were not going to hatch. (The baby swans were born!)

And the coffee shops were lovely. My favourite was 314, but purely for nerd reasons, as I just loved the idea of having p on all cups and plates, and a disguised p as a shop name. And there was the falafel shop that Srimi and I visited, although Jennifer disapproved of our unhealthy eating habits.

People, ultimately, are what a place is all about. And in this regard, the Kolleg was truly an exceptional experience for me. I found many friends amongst the Fellows and the staff, and it was a marvellous experience to share time with these people, in a totally stress-free atmosphere. It is still unbelievable to me that one can spend a whole year in which the most pressing obligation is to turn up at lunch and write about what you want to. I do not think I will ever find another place quite like this one.

My family visited me in December, and we spent a lot of time exploring. Although their stay was quite short, we had a wonderful time. I also had to leave Berlin earlier than expected because my husband was ill. I left Berlin within 24 hours of receiving this news, and I can never thank all my friends who packed and shipped my things, and helped me in so many ways.

I am writing this report at Curtin University, far away from the Wiko world, a world filled with committees, deadlines and politics. And for this reason, I have to keep this report short.

I am sure that this personal report indicates that I was forever having coffee and going for wonderful walks. This is really quite true, but in

between all this, our group conducted a successful workshop, wrote a book (details in this yearbook), visited research labs and related industry. I cannot think of a more pleasant way to work, a better set of people to work with, or another place where I could have done this. I doubt I can ever do this again, and I thank the Kolleg, the Rector and the staff at the Kolleg for making this such an exceptional year.