

'People come to our Thursday coffee mornings knowing they will find people and advice'

# Coffee, chatter and charity

Joe Louis D'Anto



*This club helps expats adjust to the ways of this city, says Ruma Singh*

It's a Thursday morning at the Leela Palace. In the enclosed courtyard the clink of teaspoons against coffee cups and the buzz of chatter in various accents can be heard as a large group of expatriate ladies meet, catch up and exchange information on a variety of subjects. It's the weekly meeting of the Overseas Women's Club, the largest and most well-established expat support group in Bangalore.

This is just one of the many functions they host in the pursuit of their twin aims: the support of local charities and promoting sociability for expats moving to Bangalore. With the city growing at a rapid pace, it's not surprising that the club has over 800 registered members today. "We had 500 two years ago," says Edith Mead Barker, VP activities and events, who organises 37 scheduled annual events on the OWC calendar to help members network and interact. "That's about one every 10 days!"

The events range from their annual mega Christmas charity bazaar, during which they gathered sufficient funds to support numerous charities, a charity ball, a monthly cocktail do, a pink elephant sale, various socials and open houses. There's lunch bunch every Thursday after the coffee morning, where members meet and go out to a different restaurant. There are also several sub-groups which meet within the OWC — a professional women's group, a German, Asian and French group, three separate playgroups, English conversational classes group

and an expectant mothers group, to name just a few. Anne Roberts, VP publications, another member of the 10-member executive committee which oversees the daily running of OWC, says, "We also like to celebrate festivals of some of our represented cultures." Recently held events were the Oktoberfest, a Beaujolais Nouveau celebration and a Japanese tea ceremony around the Cherry Blossom festival time. Plus there are road trips to different places — a tour of the new airport, a talk by an artist and a visit to a charity, are some of those recently slotted.

*Rangoli*, the monthly magazine Anne edits, contains a calendar of OWC and city events, information of what's happening in town, travel diaries and writeups on previous OWC events. Members buy the magazine, the proceeds of which are donated to charity. *The In and Out Guide*, another publication, is a kind of Bible for expats settling in, adds Edith. "It's a practical guide to Bangalore — spas, dry cleaners, schools, doctors — everything you need." The pop-



ular OWC cookbook, a collection of recipes by members from their home countries adapted to be made with Indian ingredients, is another publication.

OWC's focus on charity is an important part of its mission. "We support a wide variety of charities — schools, people with disabilities, the elderly, orphans and people with AIDS," says Alison Hussey, treasurer. Decisions on which charities to support are made by the charities committee after careful scrutiny of proposals, recommendations and site visits. "Our support tends to be proj-



**CATCHING UP:** Members of the Overseas Women's Club at one of their weekly meetings

ect-based, like providing milk for children at a school. We also follow up to see whether the money donated is actually spent," she says.

Volunteers form the base of the club. "No one escapes the pressure to volunteer," smiles Alison. Because of the eclectic mix of members, it's easy to find people with varied skills to volunteer their time within the organization and outside. "One of our male members helps with the city's ambulance services. Many are in the IT sector and in hospitality services, plus there are writers and artists as well. We have a cross section of career possibilities here," she says. Many spouses of expats who come without work permits find their skills put to good use within the OWC.

Most expats stay for an average of a year or two in the city, says Anne, but some stay much longer if contracts are renewed. "The first three months can be difficult in any country. For instance, America might have the same problems as India — like finding ways to pay your electricity bills, for in-

stance," says Edith. This is where the OWC plays a part — giving hints, tips and recommendations. "People come to our Thursday coffee mornings knowing they will find people and advice," she says.

With the numbers of expats in Bangalore growing by the day, the OWC fills a much-needed vacuum, offering support to the newly-arrived and bewildered. "I believe the latest break up of expats in Bangalore is 23% Americans, 14% British, 5-6% Australians and some Finnish," says Alison, adding, "But all this changes week to week." The OWC thrives and grows with the expanding numbers. She says, "When you change cultures, many things aren't the same. You have to adjust quickly to a 'new' normal way of life."

[ruma.singh@timesgroup.com](mailto:ruma.singh@timesgroup.com)

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(Readers who are aware of unusual groups may send in suggestions to [tribalinstincts@timesgroup.com](mailto:tribalinstincts@timesgroup.com))

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