Bombay. Kindness of strangers on the train, which arrives at 1.07 even if it says 12.48 between the C and the F. Hanging out of the train to catch a breath of cold air and feel like a movie star. The taxi drivers that don’t drive you, but when the rickshaw takes you on the late streets of Bandra, you hold on at the turns. Where the traffic is ruled by every individual’s right to go where he needs to go. Fearless ladies in heels and sarees on the motorbikes. The frowning kids on the streets and the smiling strangers. Families asking to take a picture with you. Turning a corner can take you from a bustling crowd with tobacco and lime sellers to a deserted dark alley in no time. Majestic half-crumbling mansions from the era of the British, adorned with banyan vines and pigeons. All the stuff no one ever needs being sold on the streets - spare typewriter keys, single socks, huge balloons. Colaba, where you go from ravens, balloon-people, and flower-adorned horse-carriages to the Dior and Diamonds of the Taj Mahal Palace.

Trying bombil – a duck that’s not a duck at a local place. The most beautiful skyline, grey and fuzzy in the monsoon, the city floating on a cloud. Textiles market with so much choice, you have no choice but to leave empty-handed. Chickens, cows, goats, and one lone turkey near Churchgate station roaming the city streets. Walking on fluffy white feathers in Crawford Market, deserted on a Sunday afternoon. Locals enjoying a game of cricket in the Fort area outside Bombay Stock Exchange, the Wall Street of the city. Bombay is not about the places, it is about the experiences. It is the people you meet for a split second every day, faces that make you think. And the occasional face is a face of a dark-skinned angel: sad, and reconciled with the fate, serene, and full of wisdom and understanding. You can become one by buying the angel wings for 10 rupees from the beggar children on the street.
No one who lived there would call it Mumbai, which is funny because Bombay is actually a name left by the Portuguese legacy, but here we have a force of habit. The culture of Bombay is very different from anything I have ever experienced. The main difference is being somebody. In New York, or London, you are just a person in the crown, you do not feel any real significance, but in Bombay you are the top of the top of the society, and you feel it. It is intoxicating, it feels as if there are no limitations to what you can achieve.

At the same time Bombay made me grow up from the rather romantic notions I had about India. I had read about the open-hearted people, but if you come here without a guard you will be cheated out of money and confidence. The trick in Bombay is to approach everything like a game – I could not possibly take many things seriously, because they are too strange, too crazy, and too surreal. But the most amazing and unforgettable experiences were also accidental: trying the most dangerous street food on Juhu beach during Monsoon season, running along Queen’s necklace in the rain, praying with the local women at Haji Ali… It is safe to say this summer had a huge impact on my outlook on life.
Certainly, working with locals in the office environment added to the experience as well. It was extremely challenging at the beginning as the culture was just so alien: people spoke so softly I could not even hear what they were asking me to do. As I would lean in, they would speak even softer! It was very difficult to recognize different people in the office, as I was scared of offending anyone, but also completely unable to tell them apart. I could not eat lunch for the first few weeks because the food was so spicy it would make my eyes tear up with more than a few bites. Challenges like these are not common among my friends’ experiences, but they prepared me for anything. By the end of my internship I was friends with the ladies in the office, and I still keep in touch with them, I made jokes that would make them laugh, we shared recipes of killer chilly chutneys, ordered masala pizza together, and I taught them how to braid western buns.

The most important skill I am taking away from this summer is not doing research, or office politics, or writing reports. I am not writing about my professional experience, because it was a continuation of lessons I had learned before this experience. I am going to the Spencer Stuart office in New York to present over a conference to the Delhi and Mumbai offices the conclusion of my 2 months – a presentation on the best CEO hiring practices in India. I was offered to come back next summer, something I am serious about. I feel absolutely successful at meeting my internship goals, but it is not what I am most proud of. I am proud of being able to assimilate into a completely new culture drastically different from everything I knew, I am proud of thriving in a crazy and overwhelming city that makes New York feel like a slow village, and I am proud of the people I became close with. Projects and assignments come and go but the people I met will stay in my heart forever.