

MEMORIES OF GUAM
- precious pearl of the Pacific

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Guam, Micronesia, is a breathtakingly beautiful island in the vast Pacific ocean. Located between the Philippines and Hawaii, Micronesia - a group of islands of which Guam is the most prominent - is a US Trust Territory like Puerto Rico. Guam is a major US air and naval base, but more recently has become a haven for tourists attracted by its natural beauty and tax free shopping. As an eleven year old boy accompanying my parents on a round-the-world tour in 1967, I happened to transit through Guam. That was my first contact with that charming island. Since then I have made five visits to Guam including one in 2003 with my family for my Silver Wedding Anniversary, and four within the last two years because my younger daughter Amritha was on a two year assignment in Guam (2009-11) with Pacific Daily News of the Gannett News Network. In this article I will describe my visits to Guam since 1967, make brief observations on its history and scenic beauty, and provide comparisons with other lovely islands that I have had the pleasure of visiting.

Transit in 1967: In the 1960s, my late father Professor Alladi Ramakrishnan who was Director of MATSCIENCE, The Institute of Mathematical Sciences in Madras, India, made annual academic round-the-world tours, lecturing widely at leading institutions in Europe, North America and the Orient. My father took me and my mother of these global tours. Indeed, it was due to such exposure, that I developed a passion for travel and made a decision to take to an academic career.

The trip in 1967 was westbound. My father lectured first in Europe, and then in North America, with the final stop being Seattle, where he was invited by the Boeing Research Laboratories. After that the schedule was to visit Hawaii, Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore in that order, before returning to Madras.

While we were in Seattle, my father received a telegram from Madras saying that his father's annual ceremony was two weeks earlier than anticipated. Thus that ceremony was going to be just a few days after our visit to Seattle was to conclude. My father never missed performing a single annual ceremony of his parents at our family home *Ekamra Nivas* in Madras, and did not want to miss this one. So he decided to cancel his lecture assignments in Hawaii and Japan and return directly to Madras from Seattle. Those were the glorious days of air travel when tickets were bought on a mileage basis and one could easily shift schedules and airlines without penalties as long as one was within the total mileage allotted. Pan American World Airways - PAN AM as it was known - was the unquestioned leader in international travel, and Pan Am had a routing Seattle - Honolulu - Guam - Manila - Saigon - Singapore, flown by the four engine Boeing 707 intercontinental aircraft. We thus decided to take this route and reach Madras from Singapore on Air India.

Air travel was a pleasure in those days (no security checks!), and leading airlines like Pan Am provided hotel accommodation if the transit was more than six hours. We actually had an overnight stop in Honolulu, and so Pan Am put us up at The Waikikian, a charming Hawaiian style hotel with a beachfront right next to the sprawling Hilton Hawaiian Village.

Today Hilton has purchased the Hotel Waikikian property, and built a massive tower called the Grand Waikikian as part of its expanded Hilton Hawaiian Village complex.

In Honolulu at mid-night we boarded a Pan Am Boeing 707 series 320B Intercontinental fanjet named *Jet Clipper Endeavor*, and this took us across the Pacific to Singapore making stops in Guam, Manila and Saigon. It was the peak of the Vietnam War, and so several American troops boarded the flight in Honolulu. I remember the morning landing in Guam, the island looking exquisitely beautiful amidst the torquoise blue waters of the Pacific. My mother, who hails from Kerala, was especially impressed with the coconut groves on the pristine beaches of Guam. Our transit in Guam was brief, but the beauty of the island made a lasting impression on us. At that time we were excited at the prospect of landing in Saigon, because the Vietnam War was in full swing. At Saigon airport we saw several military aircraft take-off and land, and my mother bought a straw hand bag as a souvenir of the visit to Saigon. Unfortunately, we did not buy any souvenir in Guam. We could not have imagined that four decades later, my daughter would be living in Guam!

About Guam: Micronesia is a group of thousands of islands in the Pacific scattered over an area about the size of Australia and located to the east of the Phillipines. Two of the most prominent islands in Micronesia are Guam and Saipan. Guam, which is about 200 square miles, is smaller than Oahu in the Hawaiian islands where Honolulu is located. While there are many similarities between Guam and Oahu, Guam is much quieter, but more built up compared to Kauai.

The native settlers of Guam are the *Chamorros* who resemble the Hawaiians and Polynesians. Ferdinand Magellan, the great Spanish explorer, landed in Guam while he was crossing the Pacific, and Guam came under Spanish rule for three centuries. Thus there is a strong catholic influence in Guam even today, and churches are aplently all over Guam.

Guam came under American occupation in the 1920s and the USA set up a military establishment in Guam. Pan American connected Guam to the rest of the world with its famous flying boats, especially the *China Clipper*, which stopped in Guam regularly. The relationship between the Chamorros and the Americans was very cordial because the Americans actually helped build various facilities in Guam for the native residents. Soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces who had been in possession of Saipan, over ran Guam, as the weakened American troops retreated. Within a few years the US had significantly reinforced its naval fleet and was winning major battles against the Japanese all over the Pacific. In particular, the Americans recaptured Guam from the Japanese in a significant battle at Guam's Asan Beach in 1944. Guam has been under American occupation since then and is now a trust territory. Anderson Airforce Base in the North and a Naval Base in Apra Harbor are major US military establishments in Guam. Soon after the recapture of Guam in 1944, America significantly strengthened its military presence in Guam owing to its strategic location close to Asia. In fact, the two atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 were flown on bombers that took off from Anderson Airforce Base in Guam.

Guam is just as lovely as many of the finest tropical islands in the Pacific - with its good share of coral reefs, white sand beaches lined with coconut groves, and torquoise blue waters of incredible beauty. But what sets Guam apart from the rest is that five miles

east of it is Marianas Trench, which is the deepest point on the earth - 35,800 feet deep! Owing to the proximity of this trench, the surf of the east coast of Guam is rough and the strong currents are too dangerous even for the best of swimmers. In contrast the waters of the west coast are shallow and placid, and so there is an impressive collection of five star hotels lining up famous Tumon Bay in Guam where tourists flock by the thousands. Guam is a major international airport today with Continental Airlines (now merged into United Airlines) and its subsidiary Continental Micronesia having their hubs there. Some of the other major carriers to serve Guam are Delta (formerly Northwest) Airlines, Japan Airlines, Korean Airlines, and Phillipine Airlines. Guam is a tax free shopping paradise today, and the Galleria DFS is adjacent to the hotel row in Tumon Bay, Guam. Countless Japanese tourists descend on Guam and keep the tourism industry strong and healthy. We have also visited Guam many times, and I will now describe the highlights of our trips to this island paradise.

Silver Wedding Anniversary in Guam in 2003: Mathura and I had our 25-th Wedding Anniversary in 2003. June 29 was the day of our Wedding Anniversary, and just on the previous day, Mathura conducted the Arangetram (Debut Performance) of one of her students Trina Chakravarty in Jacksonville. The call of our favourite destination - Hawaii - was too strong, and so Mathura and I left Jacksonville in the early morning of June 29 to reach the Big Island of Hawaii the same evening and checked in at the fabulous Hilton Waikaloa Resort. Two days later my daughters Lalitha and Amritha, and my parents joined us in the Big Island and stayed in a beautiful two bedroom villa at the Bay Club just outside the Hilton. We had a most memorable time in Hawaii, comparable to many of our previous visits to that most enchanting island chain. Since it was our 25-th Wedding Anniversary Year, Mathura wanted to visit a totally new island, and so we chose to go to Guam after Hawaii, having heard how nicely Guam had developed in recent years. My parents did not want to be too adventurous. So after Hawaii, we all flew to Singapore from where my parents left for Madras, but we (Mathura, my daughters and I) back tracked and went to Guam.

I remember the landing in Guam on July 7 at night. With the lights of the hotels and other establishments, the island looked like a diamond necklace in the vast Pacific Ocean. Upon arrival we picked up a spacious Mercury Marquis car from Avis and drove to the brand new Westin Guam on Tumon Bay. Although the flights to Guam on board Northwest and Continental on the sectors Singapore-Tokyo-Guam were very comfortable, food on board left something to be desired. We were ravenously hungry on arrival in Guam, and enjoyed a delicious late dinner at the Italian restaurant of the Westin after check-in.

When we got up in the morning, we realized the true beauty of Tumon Bay, a horseshoe shaped bay, like Hanauma Bay in Honolulu, Hawaii, but much larger. The waters of Tumon Bay are very calm and shallow and one can clearly see the coral below. From the balcony of our oceanfront room at the Westin, we had a breathtaking view of Tumon Bay with its incredibly beautiful turquoise blue water. We could not resist enjoying the water. So we first took a dip in the oceanside pool and then entered the placid Tumon Bay. One of the special attractions of Tumon Bay is the ride on the paddle boat. So at the insistence of Lalitha and Amritha to do something different, we rented a paddle boat and explored

Tumon Bay. The fish in the coral reefs just a couple of feet below us were incredible. Equally awesome was the magnificent view of Guam from the middle of Tumon Bay with its impressive array of five star hotels - The Hilton Guam, The Guam Marriott, The Hyatt Regency Guam, The Guam Outrigger, the Westin Guam, and the Nikko Guam - all towering above us and shining brilliantly in the morning sun.

Skirting Tumon Bay and just behind the row of beachfront hotels is "Hotel Road", the main thoroughfare of Tumon to be compared to Kalakaua Avenue skirting Waikiki Beach in Honolulu, but not as built up. Hotel Road is lined with several shopping outlets and restaurants, but what is unique about it is the Galleria - a fabulous Duty Free shopping Center filled with stores selling the most prestigious name brands.

After strolling through the Galleria and a lunch at a nearby restaurant, we went to *Two Lovers Point*, the main scenic attraction of Guam. This is located at one end of the horseshoe of Tumon Bay, but is not directly accessible from Tumon because it is surrounded by steep cliffs. The legend is that a beautiful Chamorro girl from Guam fell in love with a dashing Spanish general, but her family and clan prevented the union. So the two lovers jumped to their death from atop the cliffs. Sad as this legend may be, the view from Two Lovers Point of the full stretch of Tumon Bay and the west coast of Guam beyond it is simply breathtaking. The cliffs plunging into the turquoise blue coral waters and the verdant scenery surrounding Two Lovers Point were most impressive.

The next day we went on a ride around the island, more specifically the part of the island of Guam to the south of Tumon Bay. Just south of Tumon Bay is Agana Bay, just as beautiful, and with equally placid coral waters. The seat of Guam's Government is in Hagatna which is bordered by Agana Bay. We drove past Hagatna and Agana Bay not realizing that a few years later, Amritha would be having her job in Hagatna!

Our first stop south of Hagatna was Asan Beach and the War in the Pacific Monument commemorating the recapture of Guam from the Japanese by the American forces in a fierce battle in 1944. Asan Beach with its placid coral laden water and white sandy shore lined with coconut palms is lovely. It was hard to believe as we dipped our feet in the ocean there, that it was the site of one of the most bloody and significant battles of the Pacific in World War II.

As we proceeded south of Asan Beach, we stopped at several scenic overlooks, gazing at the pristine beauty of Guam's west coast. Of particular interest was *Magellan Point*, where the great Spanish explorer Ferdinand Magellan had landed. The southern tip of Guam at Merizo offered a view of Cocos Island of unbelievable beauty. Cocos Island is separated from Guam by a strip of water which is just a few miles wide, but the water color in this strip is the most brilliant turquoise blue I have ever seen, matched in color and vastness by the waters of Waimanalo Beach on the northern shore of the island of Oahu in Hawaii. But the entire strip of water between Guam and Cocos island is shallow, and the coral beneath the surface can be seen clearly from miles away.

After passing the Cocos Island view point at Merizo, the road turned north and we were on the east coast of Guam, where the shore is more rocky and surf is much rougher because Marianas Trench is just five miles away! We gazed in awe at the ocean because the light turquoise blue of the water near the shore turned a dark fearsome blue just a few hundred feet away owing to the significant depth caused by the trench.

On the east coast of Guam is the Tolofofu river and if one travels inland along the river, one comes to the *Tolofofu Water Falls*. It was a mile long walk through dense jungle from where we parked our car to the waterfalls, but the view was worth the effort. On our way to the falls we crossed a hideout underneath a tree where a Japanese soldier from World War II had remained hidden for about three decades not knowing that the war had ended with the Japanese surrender, and hoping that one day he would be rescued by victorious Japanese forces! That should convince you how isolated certain parts of Guam are even to this day.

After a long tiring (but enjoyable) day of sightseeing around the island, we went to Micronesia Mall to relax - have dinner at the food court there and see the movie *Saving Nemo* on Amritha's insistence. This cartoon movie about a baby fish lost in the vast Pacific was very enjoyable, and theme was quite fitting because we ourselves were right in the middle of the Pacific ocean.

On our last day in Guam we decided to explore the northern part of the island beyond Anderson Airforce Base. Tourists generally do not venture to this part of the island. Thus the beaches are there unspoilt in their beauty. We enjoyed the almost desolate and eerie silence of the northern cape of Guam, the quietness broken of course by the crashing waves. The view of the vast Pacific from the cliffs was very impressive, and in the distant horizon we could see some of the neighboring islands. At night we had dinner at a Thai restaurant called Marianas Trench with the daughter of Gretchen in our mathematics department. Gretchen, the graduate secretary in the mathematics department of the University of Florida, informed us before our trip that her daughter was stationed in Guam working for the US Airforce.

After a lovely four days, we left Guam on July 15 by Continental Airlines for Tokyo where we connected to a Northwest Airlines flight to Singapore. The exclusive upper deck of the Northwest Boeing 747-200 was particularly enjoyable since there were only sixteen of us in that luxurious cabin adjacent to the cockpit of the giant jetliner - a fine ending to great visit to Guam for our 25-th wedding anniversary.

Amritha takes up an assignment in Guam in 2009: The year 2008 brought about a major change in our lives because my father Professor Alladi Ramakrishnan passed away at our home in Gainesville on June 7 at the age of 85. Even though he was in good health and spirits until his last moments and had lived a full and remarkably successful life, it was difficult for the Alladi family to face the reality of his absence. He was such a pillar of strength for all of us and was a source of encouragement and inspiration. As a family we bonded even closer to face the future without his presence.

In December 2008 Amritha graduated with a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and opted to do two internships as a news reporter in Madras - one at the television network CNN IBN (=Indian Business Network) and the second at The Hindu, India's National Newspaper - for the next four months. Besides the "international experience" that Amritha gained from this, it also enabled her to keep company to her grandmother Mrs. Lalitha Ramakrishnan to whom the loss of my father was the most painful separation. Having Amritha in our family home Ekamra Nivas in Madras was so soothing to my mother. Amritha did remarkably well in both internships, an in particular for the Hindu, where her reports were appearing almost daily in the newspaper. My father who had such

an affection and admiration for The Hindu - a bond that had developed over the years with the Hindu family members - had he been alive, would have been most proud to see Amritha's reports in The Hindu. Shortly after Amritha completed her internship at The Hindu in May 2009, and returned to Florida, she was contacted by her former collegemate Brett Kelman who was working for Pacific Daily News in Guam which was part of the well known Gannett Newspaper Network. Brett drew Amritha's attention to a reporter position at the Pacific Daily News, and Amritha applied for this position. Amritha was offered a position as a reporter for the Pacific Daily News in Guam with a start date of mid-July, and she accepted this as a two year assignment. Mathura and I were in Madras in June when we heard this news and we were scheduled to get back to Florida by the end of June. We enthusiastically endorsed Amritha's decision to take up this assignment, even though Guam was so far away, because it would give her an international reporting experience. Mathura, my mother and I had arranged to have a vacation in Hawaii (Oahu and Kauai) on our way back to Florida, and we asked Amritha to join us in Honolulu by the end of June not only to celebrate her first job offer, but also to plan the flights to Guam.

The Hawaiian holiday was memorable in two ways - we enjoyed the sylvan beauty of Hawaii in the company of Amritha, and we also made decisions as to how Amritha was going to travel to Guam to take up her assignment. Amritha had agreed to join duty on July 20 and so that gave her about a couple of weeks after the Hawaiian holiday to pack and depart for Guam. Amritha left for Guam on July 13. Mathura, and I followed her two days later so as to help her get settled there. Delta Airlines had just completed the takeover of Northwest Airlines, and as an incentive, offered all passengers the possibility to upgrade to Business Class on certain types of Economy fares across the Pacific. We took advantage of this offer, and while in Hawaii, we purchased three tickets to Guam from Florida for Amritha, Mathura and me. My mother opted to remain in Florida while Mathura and I went to Guam for a week. So we left her in the care of Mrs. Gomathi Sundaram, her childhood friend from Trivandrum, who was in Tampa.

Amritha left Orlando for Guam via Detroit and Tokyo on July 13. However, after she had boarded the Boeing 747-400 at Detroit airport, it was announced that the flight would be delayed by several hours due to a mechanical problem. Consequently, she missed her connection in Tokyo and so was put up for the night at the modern Radisson Hotel near Narita Airport, Tokyo. We were so anxious, that we contacted Amritha by Skype at her hotel room and kept talking without realizing that she needed some rest. Amritha left for Guam only the next morning and was received by Brett at Guam airport. The Pacific Daily News had arranged a room for Amritha at the Ramada Hotel, until she would locate an apartment to move in permanently.

Visit to Guam in July 2009 to help Amritha get settled: Mathura and I took the same flights as Amritha, but two days later. Prior to landing in Guam from Tokyo, we were caught in one of the most powerful thunderstorms. The Delta Boeing 767 wobbled substantially. The only previous occasion when I had experienced such bad weather was in the summer of 1969 during a landing in Ottawa, Canada. I was thirteen years old then and travelling with my parents. The Canadian Pacific DC-8 was rocked quite badly, but managed to land smoothly, just as the Delta Boeing 767 did this time.

In Guam we stayed for a week at the magnificent Hilton Guam Resort and Spa which was very close to the Ramada. The Hilton, which is the first of the five star hotels in Guam, sits at one end of Tumon Bay and commands a breathtaking view of the bay. Previously it was known as Hilton International Agana. It was a pleasure to watch the golden sunrise and the crimson sunsets from the balcony of our room overlooking the ocean.

Since we had gone to Guam with the specific goal of helping Amritha get settled, we did not do any sightseeing on this trip, since one week was barely enough to get many things done for Amritha - look for an apartment, open a bank account, buy a car, etc. Amritha was busy starting on her job and getting to learn the work practices at Pacific Daily News. So she did not have time for apartment hunting or for visiting car lots. She left those to us. So each morning after breakfast, Mathura and I would visit different apartment complexes and car lots. In a few days we arranged a nice apartment for Amritha in the area of Tumon in Guam, and a two year lease on a new Nissan Versa car. Tumon in Guam is like Waikiki in Honolulu. Amritha said that she would move now into this apartment in Tumon, but in due course will probably move to an apartment in Agana, where the office of Pacific Daily News was located. And this is what she did eventually.

Although Mathura and I were busy apartment hunting in the daytime, we did relax and enjoy our visit immensely. We had lunches in different nice restaurants, and in the evenings we got together with Amritha after she came back from work. During the week we were there, Guam celebrated their National Day with a big parade in Agana. This National Day Parade in Guam is one of their premier annual events, and within a day of starting work at Pacific Daily News, Amritha was given an assignment to cover this National Day Parade. Mathura and I were proud to see a prominent front page article and news report by Amritha so soon after joining duty.

It was painful to take leave of Amritha at Guam airport. Even though the view was spectacular as we took off, we were so sad to leave Guam. But the comforting thought was that Amritha was going to get a nice international experience, especially on matters relating to the Pacific Rim, while working in Guam. Also, Mathura and I decided that in the next two years, we would change our focus from Hawaii to Guam and visit Amritha on our transpacific journey to or from India in December/January and May/June each year.

Amritha recognized at Pacific Daily News: Just as the Editors of *The Hindu* in India recognized that Amritha was a talented reporter with unbounded energy, so did the administration at Pacific Daily News. Two things happened rather quickly.

In October 2009, Continental Airlines, which is the principal airline for Guam with the subsidiary Continental Micronesia having a Pacific hub in Guam, started a new non-stop service between Guam and Fiji. Amritha was chosen by Pacific Daily News to take the opening flight of Continental to Fiji and report not only on Continental's new service, but also on Fiji as a tourist destination. On the flight Amritha travelled with some of the elite of Guam and certain other persons important to Continental Airlines. She spent a week in Fiji, visited several of the islands there, stayed at luxurious resorts, and reported not only on the resorts but also on the way of life in the villages. Her blog on Fiji for the Pacific Daily News was very popular and won high praise. The management of Pacific Daily News, recognizing Amritha's many talents, offered her the post of Assistant Editor within six months of her starting work in Guam. This was a demanding position because it

involved reviewing the articles written by other reporters before approving it for printing, and working with the editor to decide which news report goes on what page. This meant that Amritha had to work almost until mid-night each day and see the paper go to printing before calling it a day. In spite of the demanding nature of the job, Amritha accepted the promotion to Assistant Editorship, given to her at such a young age and early stage of her career.

Visit to Guam in January, 2010: On our way back to Florida from India via the Pacific, Mathura and I decided to spend a few days in Guam. Amritha had settled down comfortably and so we wanted to spend time and do some sightseeing with her. We also wanted to see certain things we missed during our visit in 2003, and which we could not see in July 2009 when we had no time for sightseeing. Mathura and I stayed again at the magnificent Hilton Guam Resort and Spa, and once again, our ocean front room commanded a splendid view of Tumon Bay.

One of the most popular trips is to go around the southern part of Guam - south from Tumon via Agana to various beaches and bays. Almost immediately south of Agana is Asan Beach, the site of the great battle of 1944, when American forces landed there and took possession of the island from the Japanese. In 2003 we strolled along Asan Beach and the beach park there, but right next to it is a naval museum which we decided to see this time. At this museum, there is a short movie about the Battle of Guam fought on Asan Beach. It was a touching movie and I wished that my father was with us because he had told us many times about World War II and the great battles of the Pacific.

In those few months in Guam, Amritha had made a number of friends some of whom she first met at the Siva Temple in Tamuning near Tumon, and others she met at the Deepavali get together at the Hilton. Indeed, for the Deepavali function in Fall 2009, Amritha performed a brisk Bharathanatyam dance that she had choreographed for the Gator Natyam group at the University of Florida that she founded. Here in Florida, that dance was performed by her and six other girls as a group, but in Guam she performed it solo. For this dance we sent her the dress by Fedex to reach her in time. It was well worth it because her performance for the Deepavali function in Guam was acclaimed by all. One couple - Shaha and Muhammad Jiffry - who attended the event, became good friends of Amritha. They came to meet us at the Hilton. Mr. Jiffry was the Chief Engineer at the Outrigger Guam resort in Tumon (having previously worked for the Hyatt Regency Guam Resort), and he and his wife invited us for a dinner at the Palm Cafe of the Outrigger which we enjoyed immensely.

The head of catering at the Hilton, Ms. Devika, was also a good friend of Amritha, and she welcomed us to the Hilton with a beautiful dessert and fruit tray that was sent to our room while we were at the Outrigger. Thus we enjoyed VIP treatment thanks to Amritha's contacts.

We very much wanted to see Amritha's office, and so on the second day Amritha suggested that we come there by noon, see her office and have lunch with her. When we arrived at Pacific Daily News in Agana, Amritha introduced us to Mr. David Christostomo, the Editor, who took us to the print room and showed us how the newspaper is printed around midnight so as to be delivered at sunrise.

After lunch with Amritha at a Mexican restaurant near her office, we visited the

Church of.... literally next door to her office. Due to the strong Christian influence dating back to the time when Spain was in possession of Guam, there are churches aplenty all over the island; but this church at Agana is perhaps the most famous of all in Guam, and indeed one of the landmarks of the island. That night Mathura and I attended a Sai Bhajan at the Hindu Temple in Tamuning, and here we had the opportunity to meet a few more members of the Indian Community.

One of Amritha's friends was a lady by name Annalakshmi, who was running a Montessori School in Guam. Amritha got to know her quite well because she wrote an article about the Montessori School for the Pacific Daily News. Ms. Annalakshmi is a Sri Lankan, and she very kindly invited us to her home in Tamuning for dinner the next night. At that dinner we met a few more of Amritha's friends, but Amritha could join us only quite late, because as the Assistant Editor, she had night work almost daily.

On our last night in Guam, we were invited to the home of Professor Balakrishnan of the University of Guam for dinner. He and his family had been of great help to Amritha. The University of Guam is on the other side of the island, and since it was night time, Amritha took us in her car instead of asking me to drive. Professor Balakrishnan and his wife are long time residents of Guam, and I remember our good friend Ramanathan in Hawaii mention his name when I informed Ramanathan that Amritha was moving to Guam for two years. It was a very pleasant evening at the Balakrishnan residence, where we enjoyed delicious South Indian food.

So when we departed Guam the next day, we left with a feeling of satisfaction on seeing Amritha comfortably settled and doing well at work, and the many friends she had made, some of whom we had the pleasure of meeting. Of course we relaxed and enjoyed a lot of things the island had to offer, some in the company of Amritha, such as the tennis at the Hilton Resort that Amritha and I played one morning.

Visit to Guam with mother, June 2010: In June 2010, on our return from India to Florida with my mother, we stopped in Guam for five days. This was my mother's first visit to Guam since that memorable transit through the island in 1967. To make it more convenient for all of us, we decided to get a two bedroom condo with a kitchen on this visit instead of a hotel. Mr. Mohammed Jiffry, who was working for the Outrigger Guam Hotel, helped in reserving a beautiful two bedroom condo at the Ohana Oceanview, which was part of the Outrigger chain of properties at that time. The Ohana was just behind the ring of hotels fronting Tumon Bay and so was about two blocks from the ocean. But it was on an elevation, and so our room had a magnificent view of Tumon Bay and of Guam.

On the very first day of our stay in Guam, Amritha hosted a lunch at an Italian restaurant in Tumon, where she invited about half a dozen of her friends who had been of great help to her. It was a nice way to start our visit to Guam by meeting these friends of Amritha over lunch.

We showed my mother all of the scenic spots of Guam we had enjoyed on our previous visits. These included the Two Lovers Point, and a ride along the southern side of the island with stops at various beaches and scenic lookouts. Amritha joined us on some of these sightseeing trips when she had a break from work, such as the visit to the Naval museum commemorating the Battle of Guam at Asan Beach.

Amritha wanted us to see something completely different on this trip that would be

a unique experience. As noted above, the deepest point in the world is Marianas Trench, just five miles away from the eastern coast of Guam. Amritha knew a landowner who had property on the eastern coast facing Marianas Trench. When Amritha was writing a report about the proposed expansion of Anderson Airforce Base in Guam as a consequence of the US troop reduction in Japan and the resulting increase of troops in Guam, she interviewed several individuals who were concerned about the expansion of the air base. One of them was this land owner whose property was close to the air force base. Amritha's care and concern for the residents of Guam was appreciated by the locals. In particular, this land owner became a friend of Amritha. Since he had a large tract of wilderness land with an unspoiled rugged beach front facing Marianas trench, Amritha arranged for us to visit his property in order to get a close up view of the ocean near Marianas trench. Needless to say the view was awesome - of the jagged coastline and the dark blue water, whose darker color was due to the menacing depth of the trench below.

Since we were staying in a condo with a kitchen, we were able to have fantastic Indian food so lovingly cooked by Mathura. I felt that she excelled herself in Guam because she was also cooking for Amritha who was missing home cooked Indian food there. The shopping at the huge Payless grocery store at the nearby Mall of Micronesia was enjoyable, because we found the vegetables in Guam so fresh - some native to Guam, and others flown in from nearby Philippines - and this made the food prepared by Mathura even more delicious. Here we were at the Ohana, enjoying South Indian food, sitting on the balcony overlooking Tumon Bay!

Knowing my desire to stay in lovely hotels and condos on our international trips, Amritha suggested that we should see the beautiful and sprawling Leo Palace Resort in the uplands of central Guam. The mega resort is complete with everything you could think of - golf courses, tennis courts, olympic size pools, a racing track, hiking trails, a bowling alley, a fine upscale restaurant, etc. We were very much impressed with the size and beauty of this resort, and so at Amritha's suggestion, we decided we would stay here on our next visit.

All in all, my mother enjoyed her visit immensely, and kept saying that in many ways she felt that Guam was even more beautiful than Hawaii. She liked Guam so much that she presented me a beautiful and comprehensive book about Guam.

Visit in June 2011 as Amritha completes her assignment: Amritha's two year contract with Pacific Daily News in Guam was ending in July 2011. Her employer wanted her to continue, but she wanted to return to the mainland to explore other opportunities. Besides, she felt that in these two years she had acquired a good amount of experience and knowledge about the Pacific Rim in general, and Guam in particular. Since Amritha was finishing her term in Guam, Mathura, my mother and I decided to stop in Guam in June 2011 on our way from India to Florida via the Pacific in order to help her wind up her establishment.

As suggested by Amritha on our earlier visit, we stayed at the magnificent Leo Palace Resort. Amritha met us at the airport when our flight arrived there at midnight and escorted us to the resort which was nestled in the verdant central highlands of Guam. We had a spacious two bedroom condominium completely furnished with all amenities, and Amritha decided to stay with us there for that week. When we got up in the morning,

we were delighted to see breathtaking views from the lanai (balcony) of the ocean on both sides of the island - the Tumon and Agana Bay areas in the west and the Marianas Trench side on the east. This was because the resort itself was on the highlands, and our room was on a high floor and therefore commanded a splendid view of the sprawling resort, of Guam island and of the ocean.

Amritha said that we should do something very different on this visit. So on the very first day, in the morning, after enjoying a delicious South Indian brunch cooked by Mathura, we went to Ritidian Beach on the northern corner of the island. This remote beach has one of the finest stretches of pearl white sand, surrounded by verdant forests and soaring cliffs. It was indeed a paradise. At Ritidian Beach we met two colleagues of Amritha who were having a swim in the turquoise blue waters of Ritidian Beach. In the afternoon, on our way back to central Guam, we stopped at the Nikko Guam Resort where Mathura and my mother relaxed for an hour. While the two ladies were at the Nikko, Amritha and I went on a hike to nearby Phi-Phi beach which is right beneath Two Lovers Point. The Nikko and the Two Lovers Point are at one end of the horseshoe shaped Tumon Bay and so offer excellent views of Tumon Bay. Since Phi-Phi beach is in between the Nikko and the Two Lovers Point, all through the hike we had outstanding views of different sections of the bay.

The second day, at Amritha's insistence that I should do something unique on this visit, we joined her colleague Eric on a hike at Pagat on the Marianas Trench side of Guam. Some of Amritha's colleagues at Pacific Daily News like Brett and Eric, were serious hikers, and often the trails they chose were very challenging. Amritha had joined them on certain hikes, and therefore was used to the ordeal. Knowing that I would not survive the difficult hikes, Amritha and Eric chose an "easy hike" at Pagat for me. But even this was very strenuous because most of the three hour (round trip) hike was over wet rocky terrain, that was often steep and slippery, the thick forest vegetation was thorny, and there were mosquitos as well. So we had to wear gloves to protect our hands from getting bruised as we clung to the rocks; of course we sprayed ourselves with mosquito repellent in good measure. The hike was worth the effort, because at the very end, we had a spectacular view of the ocean over Marianas trench, and the rocky beaches of Guam's east shore. I also realized that one of the beaches we saw from the view point at the end of the hike was precisely the beach on the property of Amritha's friend that we saw on our previous visit. Thus although the hike was tough and had its scary moments, it was well worth it. Also Amritha was happy that I could share the pleasure of a Guam hike with her. We were ravenously hungry after the hike, and were glad that Mathura had prepared the most delicious South Indian lunch for us. As we enjoyed this feast on the balcony of our condo, I showed Mathura and my mother the location of Pagat in the distance.

The Leo Palace Resort had lawn tennis courts where Amritha and I wanted to play. But we postponed this to the fourth day because I needed to rest my aching bones on the third day after the strenuous hike.

In addition to hiking, Amritha also did some snorkeling in Guam. Actually Tumon Bay with its crystal clear calm and shallow water was ideal for snorkeling. So on the last day, I went to Tumon Bay in the morning with Amritha for snorkeling. This was very enjoyable.

On this visit Amritha hosted a dinner for her Indian friends at the same Italian restaurant in Tumon as she did on our previous visit. It was indeed a very pleasant evening. However, the Balakrishnans were unable to make it to this dinner. So on our last night in Guam, we invited the Balakrishnans to join us for a poolside dinner at the Hilton, where we enjoyed a polynesian type show with its fitting finale - the fire dance.

When we left Guam the next day, we knew that Amritha was going to be back with us very soon. But then we asked ourselves when or whether we would visit Guam again. The beauty of Guam and the lovely memories convinced me and Mathura that we should visit this Pearl of the Pacific in the future - perhaps with our grandchildren!

Epilogue

Just as we visited Amritha in Guam four times during her two year stay there, Amritha visited Florida three times in between. One was for a baby shower that we had in Gainesville for my older daughter Lalitha. On two other visits, she provided vocal support for Arangetrams that Mathura conducted in Jacksonville and Gainesville.

Upon completion of her assignment in Guam, Amritha expressed her desire to visit a new place in the Orient on her way back to Florida. So we arranged a three day holiday for her in Hong Kong. Amritha flew by Philippine Airlines from Guam to Hong Kong via Manila, and stayed at the lovely Sheraton Hong Kong on the famous Nathan Road in Kowloon for three nights. She had actually visited Hong Kong with us in 1990 and stayed at the Sheraton, but she did not remember any of it because she was only three years old then. On this trip Amritha explored various sections of Kowloon and Hong Kong Island and created a fine blog about her visit to this enchanting city. On departing Hong Kong, Amritha was on the new nonstop Delta flight to Detroit flown by the ultra long range Boeing 777.

After returning to the mainland, Amritha informed us that while in Guam, she and her friend Eric had created a music CD that was soon to appear on YouTube. Eric was very proficient with creating music on a variety of instruments, and this was his hobby. Amritha is a talented vocalist and so the two combined to form a music group called "Kuruvintam". The first CD they produced was released on New Year's Day in 2012, with the song "The Way" providing a brisk and lilting opening. The photo shoot for this song was at various locations that we had visited with Amritha - Pagat, Ritidian beach, Phi-Phi beach, and the rooftop of the Italian restaurant in Tumon. Thus Guam brought out the musical side of Amritha as well, and this CD is a charming addition to our Guam memorabilia.