

The incredible journey

Elon students plan to embark across India unaided in Rickshaw Run

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Senior Reporter

Most Elon University students are familiar with Bio-Carts, the small vehicles used by members of Elon's maintenance staff to travel around campus.

If you pluck this little electric vehicle out of the "Elon bubble" and place it in Northeast India, people would probably call it a rickshaw — a two-wheeled hooded vehicle drawn by one or more people.

This January during Winter Term, five Elon students will be driving two rickshaws nearly 2,000 miles in less than two weeks in an ultimate adventure called the Rickshaw Run in India.

Seniors Maria Castine, Will Stirn, Ben Donahue, Jack Halligan and junior Jordan Nulsen will be making this journey. Together they form Team Elon Tuk Tuk.

Surviving the journey

The five will arrive in India Dec. 26 for rickshaw training — learning how to drive the doorless vehicles.

After rickshaw lessons and various pre-departure activities, Team Tuk Tuk (which will be divided into two rickshaws) will travel from Jaisalmer, Rajasthan in Northeast India to Kochi, Kerala, which is approximately 1,800 miles south.

"We have a two- to three-week period to complete the journey and will be completely unassisted," Stirn said. "When our rickshaw breaks down, which it will, we'll have to use our skills along with the local people and things that exist to help us. We'll experience India in a very in-depth, chaotic way. It's basically a long road trip in slow vehicles similar to motorized bicycles."

"More like tricycles," Donahue said with a laugh.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines adventure in numerous ways but offers one definition that especially pertains to Team Tuk Tuk:



(Left to right) Team Elon Tuk Tuk is comprised of seniors Maria Castine, Will Stirn, Ben Donahue, Jack Halligan and junior Jordan Nulsen. The team will participate in The Adventurists' Rickshaw Run in January and will have two weeks to pull two rickshaws down the Western length of India completely unaided.

"a remarkable or unexpected event, or series of events, in which a person participates as a result of chance, a novel or exciting experience."

Seventy-eight other teams will assemble from multi-national backgrounds to crouch into their rickshaws and embark on a journey down the western length of India together, thrown together by chance.

Forming the Tuk Tuks

When thinking about a trip of this magnitude, it's assumed the travelers are close friends.

Although Team Tuk Tuk is tight-knit currently, they didn't start out that way.

Each member majors in a different area of study, but all had Stirn as a mutual friend.

He seems to act as the team's mastermind and common tie who brought this unlikely group together.

"You're ridiculous," Donahue said, addressing Stirn as he recalled Stirn's initial adventure pitch. "He came up to me — completely on a whim — and said, 'How do you feel about riding rickshaws through India?' I immediately said, 'No. That can't be feasible on any level.'"

Halligan laughed and responded with his own recollection of Stirn's approach.

"I was in the library and he came up to me and was like, 'Hey, what are you doing Winter Term?'" Halligan said. "I told him I wanted to study abroad but I missed the deadline. He was like, 'How do you feel about going to India?' I was like, 'Go on.'"

Castine recently joined the team after Stirn approached her at Irazu Coffee Shop.

"I had already talked to her about [the idea] last spring and I was like, 'Hey, we're trying to find a fifth person and guess what? You should be that person,'" Stirn said. "Texts later, there she was."

Stirn's enthusiasm for adventure and his convincing pitch sold the seniors on the idea. But the recruitment of Nulsen happened a bit differently.

"My family and I were eating at Pandora's Pies," Stirn said. "They saw [Nulsen] and were like, 'I wonder what she does with her life.' So we asked, and she said she'd transferred from the University of Vermont and grew up with horses. My family owns a dude ranch and I