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Living in Chennai can be a challenging and rewarding experience for anyone. BHANU MATHI MOHAN takes a look at how 'the expat ladies' have organised themselves to extract the maximum from the city

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HOME AWAY FROM HOME Members of the Overseas Women's Club

For many years now, in one of Chennai's outdoor coffee shops, a group of ladies from many different nationalities meet on the last Wednesday of every month. They are not part of a visiting tour group or members of a strange, secret society.

They are ladies who have recently relocated to Chennai from different parts of the world. They are members of the Overseas Women's Club of Madras (OWC).

The OWC was first started in 1972 by a group of expatriate women primarily to organise sporting activities for their members. Today it acts as an unregistered, non-profit organisation whose primary role is social networking and fund raising for charity.

With more than two hundred members, all of whom hold foreign passports and have settled in Chennai, the OWC is one of the city's two organised expat clubs, besides the British Business and Social Club (BBSC).

Among various activities conducted by the group, a monthly meet-and-greet is held for new members so that they can learn about the support and social network the OWC offers as well as the opportunities to become involved in raising funds and volunteer work for their nominated charity groups.

Recently at one such meeting, ladies from the U.S., the U.K., Denmark, Canada, Singapore, Sweden, South Africa, Finland and Australia discussed the

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many crucial matters concerning moving to Chennai. High on the list of topics was the education of their children, weekend breaks, shopping and cultural activities.

Member of the OWC Executive Committee shared their knowledge on the ins-and-outs of living in Chennai with the new arrivals. The OWC offer many organised activities for their members, including bridge and mah-jong evenings, monthly tiffin and lunch dates, Scottish Dancing sessions, weekly play-groups for children, and a fortnightly drinks evening for members and their partners.

Supporting charities

The group also supports many charities by way of collecting money through membership fees as well as fundraising events such as an annual lunch and a gala ball. Some of the charities they contribute funds to are Shishu Bhavan in Royapuram, Nirmal Hriday in Ennore, Cheshire Homes in Tiruvanmiyur, Andhra Mahila Sabha in Adyar, St. George's Cathedral Home on Peters Road, Friends in Need on Poonamallee High Road, Home of Hope in Maduravoyal, Jeevodaya in Manali and The Little Sisters of the Poor on Harrington Road.

Although not all expat women who live in Chennai are members of the OWC, the group seems to act as a good starting point for foreign women to get to know this city.

"I think it is important for newcomers to Chennai to meet people and make friends, especially those who are in the same boat as you, and the OWC provides a great platform for doing just so," says Candy Noad of RA Puram who has lived in Chennai along with her husband for two years.

Widening horizons

"I got to meet people who are either going through the same problems as I or have gone through it all and are able to give me advice on how to adjust to daily life in Chennai and cope with different situations. Through the OWC, I have made great friends with people from all over the world and from all walks of life. It has widened my horizon."

The level of involvement within the club seems to fluctuate among members according to their tenure in Chennai. Tania Redman from Alwarpet arrived in Chennai three years ago from New Zealand along with her husband and children.

"I have made some very good friends through the OWC and that was really important to me. When I first arrived in Chennai I found the club members very handy for information on my children's school, domestic staff and even where to buy different kinds of groceries. However, the longer I stay in Chennai, the more I feel part of the place and my involvement with the group is now less but still very enjoyable!" she says.

The presence of groups such as the OWC in the city is testimony to the fact that Chennai has always prided itself on its hospitable ways. As the expat population continues to increase, the impact of clubs such as this will also become more apparent and will surely add to the rich diversity of this city's culture. For more information on the OWC visit www.owcmadras.com.

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