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ELECTRIC NEWS

She hugs tens of thousands of strangers

Indian 'hugging saint' won't leave till everyone in queue has been embraced

By Hedy Khoo

March 31, 2009

SHE waited 16 hours for a hug that lasted mere seconds.

But for Filipina Evangeline Alivio, it was worth the long wait.

The 36-year-old civil servant flew here from the Philippines with 20 friends just to see the 'hugging saint' and to be embraced by her.

Said Madam Alivio: 'I don't mind the wait.'

Mata Amritanandamayi, the 'hugging saint' who is popularly known as Amma, which means mother in several Indian languages, is here to spread her message of love and to give hugs.

Held at the Suntec Convention Centre, the three-day event, which is organised by the local Amriteswari Society, has seen 12,000 people since Saturday morning.

From 10.30am to 3pm, then 7pm until 3.30am, anybody can be hugged by Amma.

Madam Alivio had waited from 10am on Saturday till 2am the next day for the hug.

She then stayed on until 4am to continue looking at Amma. She made her way back again yesterday to listen to her teachings.

'It's something in her face and her presence that touches me. She feels like a mother to me.'

Singaporean Lakshmi Velan, 27, who was recently retrenched, arrived at 8pm yesterday and was prepared to wait until 3am, or however long it takes to receive Amma's hug.

'I feel good and blessed when she hugs me. She is a divine being. No good things come without waiting and I am willing to wait for her hug,' said Madam Velan.

She explained that the recession blues do not trouble her. 'Amma makes me feel... content with what I have,' she added.

At Amma's last visit a year ago, she had queued for 51/2 hours at the Singapore Expo. People who arrive for hugs are issued a number before taking a seat inside the convention hall to wait their turn.

The Amriteswari Society said 5,000 turned up from 10.30am to 3pm yesterday, with 7,000 in the evening for the second session which started from 7pm.

The event will end only after Amma has hugged every one in the queue.

Yesterday evening, the 32,000sqft hall was packed as Amma spoke to the crowd in Malayalam, the language of Kerala state in India, as her aide translated her words into English.

One of Amma's core followers, Miss Emmanuelle, 31, who declined to give her full name, is French. She has taken a year off from her work as a social worker in Paris to follow Amma on her travels.

She arrived in India in December and will return to Paris in October later this year. She said: 'People are so pre-occupied by money and business that they forget how to love. Amma teaches about love, how to give love and to lead a simple life.'

Miss Emmanuelle declined to say if she has to pay for her own air fare, accommodation and living expenses or if these are taken care of by Amma's society in India.

During this trip, Amma will be personally giving \$100 provision vouchers, goody bags and her hugs to 50 needy people from two blocks of one-room rental flats in Woodlands.

The chairman of the Amriteswari Society said the gifts come from donations made to the society.



PATIENT: People queuing up for hours to hug Amma. PICTURES: SHIN MIN DAILY NEWS, LIANHE WANBAO



Story index

- Gotcha! No 'new' Merlion
- He's better off if his car was stolen
- I want my money back
- Man on top of MOM building calls police
- SHAME THEM, BUT...
- SHAME THEM
- Some try to stuff money in cops' pockets
- New team formed to battle crime at Integrated Resorts
- 'Million-dollar gun deal claim baseless and a sham'
- Someone stole my house
- Mum-in-law treats trio as slaves
- He spends \$700,000 on 'work trips'
- Dr Mahathir makes campaign comeback
- Indian engineer goes on killing spree
- He stabs others, rams truck into them
- Big hoo-ha over economic powwow

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THE HUGGING SAINT IN S'PORE



When she came to Singapore last year, more than 35,000 people got hugged. This time, some got more than an embrace from Indian spiritual leader Mata Amritanandamayi, known worldwide as the 'Hugging Saint'. At Suntec Singapore over the weekend, she also gave out \$100-provision vouchers and goody bags to 50 people who live in one-room flats, and 100 bursaries to needy students. Organisers expected a turnout of more than 40,000. To date, she has given more than 27 million hugs around the world including Europe, the United States and the Middle East. DON WONG

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STORY INDEX

12 hours for a hug from Amma

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F-stops and pit-stops

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NEWS



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12 hours for a hug from Amma

>tabla's Surendar Kaur describes her long wait to get a hug from India's 'Hugging Saint' last year. This year, she will be in Singapore on March 28.

I HEARD about her from my husband and I was curious to meet her. So when she visited Singapore last year in March, I took my two children and waited in a long queue at the Singapore Expo.

There were about 5,000 people like us waiting to get a hug from Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, who is popularly known as the "Hugging Saint". But to her devotees, she is Amma. When people got tired they either sat on the floor or just lay down for a short nap. During the time we spent waiting for our turn we made several friends and got to know more about Amma. Many described her hugs as "electrifying".

As our wait stretched into the wee hours we thought of giving up but decided against it on realising that if Amma could go on we could too. Our turn came after 12 hours. Amma whispered something into my ear and hugged me. I felt an indescribable chill down my back.

Now you know why my family and I will be there on March 28.

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