

Sylvia Wright Volunteering Report - September 2017

Emma Deane

Overview Of The Trip:

On the 25th July myself and two others, Cait and Sophie set off on our journey from Manchester to Tamil Nadu, India. Volunteering has always been something I have wanted to do since leaving school so when the opportunity came up to volunteer with the Sylvia Wright's Trust I was eager to get involved. Once we had been accepted the real fun began as we could start planning our trip which for me meant buying the children goodies! From initial enquiries to boarding our flight we were given the full help and support of the trustees with nothing being too much trouble which made organising the trip that little bit easier.

We volunteered at the Sylvia Wright's trust for 3 weeks until mid August splitting our time equally, spending the first week in the Rangammal School for the Deaf, the second week in the Florence Nightingale School of Nursing and the last week in the Integrated Educational and Therapy Centre. Not only were we able to become actively involved in the teaching of the students, we were given opportunities that very few other people visiting India would have been lucky enough to get involved with. During our stay we were given a tour of the local temples and churches, planned a weekend visit to Pondicherry, visited a local village and community health centre to provide health advice to locals, experienced a tour of the hospital Sylvia set up when she first arrived in India and participated in Independence Day celebrations - a real highlight. It gave us a chance to see the real India, experience real traditions and interact with village locals which we would not have got from a normal holiday.

I won't lie the whole trip was a massive challenge that pushed me out of my comfort zone from start to finish and some days were tougher than others but it is one of the best things I have ever done and a trip I will remember forever. It was once I arrived home and reality began to sink back in that I realised just how lucky we had been to enjoy all the experiences we had been given during our stay. Experiencing the real India, interacting with the children and leading workshops for the nursing students were the most rewarding aspects of my trip. The children put a smile on my face every day and it makes you realise just how insignificant some things at home really are. Making friendships with them, playing with them and helping them learn was an unforgettable experience, one which I will look back on with fond memories forever.

Why Should You Get Involved?

As someone who worries about everything especially when it comes to flying somewhere completely new and throwing yourself into the unknown I completely get why some may have reservations about volunteering - I know I did before I flew out to India. However with some things in life you just have to go for it. For whatever reservations you may have whether its around something simple like worrying if you can cope in the heat or something more serious like worrying about being homesick or adjusting to the culture shock I can safely say from experience that it's all worth it. You possibly will get homesick and there will definitely be some days when your out of your comfort zone in a completely new place with a new language and different culture to contend with but thats all part of the experience and you have to embrace it. It's what makes the trip so special. The skills you will gain from volunteering and the experiences you will share along the way will stay with you for life. It's a chance to make a difference to those less fortunate whilst making memories along the way and building new friendships - I made a friend for life during my stay and built on my friendship with a lifelong uni pal which was only made possible by signing up. If there is even a slim possibility that its something you could see yourself getting involved with I would say go for it. I couldn't recommend it enough, you'll be looked after by the lovely staff from the minute you arrive and more importantly you'll be the next friendly face from the UK that those children get so excited to meet and befriend.

Top Tips For Future Visitors:

1) Be organised beforehand:

I found the week with the nursing students the most rewarding as we were given the opportunity to lead workshops based around different subjects such as leadership, communication, culture and overcoming language barriers. At first we were all nervous but we gained so much from the workshops and it was great to see that the students were learning as much from us as we were from them. Despite this we weren't as well equipped as we would have liked. This wasn't too much of a problem as we improvised and had access to the computer suite during our lesson planning. However if we had been aware that we would be teaching full workshops we would have brainstormed ideas and games beforehand and brought some more teaching supplies. So just as a heads up if you are planning to spend time in the nursing college it may be worthwhile planning your lessons in advance to gain the most out of the experience.

2) Take Supplies:

In terms of living take a travel kettle and bring your own dry food it saved our skin. As its a boarding school you will be supplied with 3 meals a day, breakfast, lunch and dinner. As great as the first few days were trying traditional food, the meals are quite repetitive and you often get served the same thing every day that's just how they do things in India. We were all thankful for the food we got but as week two approached we started to miss home comforts. So my advice would be to bring a stock of dry food you can keep securely in your room. We took biscuits, breakfast bars and mugshots and they were the perfect snack to grab throughout the day and keep energy levels up in the heat. The kitchen staff are all so lovely and they don't mind you asking for specifics, obviously within reason. For example we bought our own cereal from the local village on one of our trips and they were more than happy to supply us with a flask of milk at breakfast as an alternative to what they were serving. On a side note make sure you take bug spray as you can sometimes get unwanted friends in your room at night and bring tupperwares to store your open food in and keep them hidden in the depths of your bag otherwise ants will have a field day.

3) Embrace the culture:

This is a big one. If I'm being honest India was never on my bucket list but I'm so glad I've had the opportunity to go. If you've never been out of the western world it's a massive culture shock but this was one of the highlights for me and its so fun to learn all about their traditions and way of life. We were lucky enough to spend our last full day in India celebrating Independence Day which we bought our own sari's for. So try the food, ride in a tuc tuc and embrace traditional dress its all part of the fun.

4) Be prepared to be thrown out of your comfort zone:

Every day presents a new challenge but thats all part of the experience. Be open minded and believe in yourself and your half way there. They say you get what you put in and thats so true with volunteering, the more time you give the more you'll get out of the experience.

5) Don't be afraid to overcome the language barrier:

This was one of the main things I worried about before leaving the UK but its not a problem when you arrive. The staff are a credit to the school and the majority can understand simple English. There are a few teachers, Mrs Stella being the main, that have very good English so don't worry you'll get by. We even tried to learn a few simple things in Tamil which helped in some situations. I can only remember how to say Elephant now I'm home but its great fun to get the kids to teach you something traditional.

6) Stay in touch:

When your home its easy to get back into your normal routine and within a week of being back it feels like a million lifetimes ago that you were really out there. We made a promise that we'd stay in touch with the kids and plan on writing to them a few times a year to keep the bond growing. They say all good things must come to an end which is true to an extent but it doesn't mean that once your home you shouldn't keep in contact. I'm so grateful to the trust and will continue to support the fabulous work Sylvia does out in India for many years to come.