

My Gap Month in Sri Lanka: Teaching Monks, Working in an Orphanage and Studying at a meditation centre

I have absolutely no idea how I am going to condense this into 1000 words but I will try to write about my experiences and how I felt about them, and what I would have done in hindsight as succinctly as possible! I am quite prone to rambling, so if there is a specific thing that you are interested in then just skip to that section (if you have the slightest interest in Buddhism or meditation then I would recommend "Rock Hill Hermitage" as well as that was the best part of my trip!) Before I start would like to thank the Kempson Rosedale Enterprise Trust hugely for giving me this utterly unique and fantastic opportunity, without them I would not have had half the wonderful experience that I did.

General Information on what I did: I spent September 2015 in Galle, Southern Province of Sri Lanka teaching English in a Pirivena (a school as part of a Buddhist Monastery) to monks aged 11-15; and working in a primary school at and orphanage looking after (absolutely adorable) children aged 0-5. At the weekends I journeyed to Colombo, the capital city, Anaradapura, the ancient capital city, Dambulla and Sigirya, popular tourist destinations, and Kandy where I spent 4 days (including my 19th birthday) at Rock Hill International Meditation Centre learning the art of meditation and teaching English to the Bangladeshi Buddhist disciples there. There was only one other volunteer here during my stay, a German girl called Juliane, but luckily she spoke perfect English and we got on really well (especially after a couple of Lion Beers..) We stayed with a Host Family in Galle who looked after us and helped us out with whatever we needed, giving us advice that only a true local would know, so that was really useful. The family I lived with have two dogs, a German shepherd called Bruno and a lab puppy called Bobby and they don't really walk them (a culture more than a cruel thing). They were very happy to just let us do what we wanted with them so we took them for walks every day (which the dogs were ecstatic about) and made us feel slightly more at home. I was also asked to teach at another school by a stranger I met on the street which I thoroughly enjoyed (the only girls I taught and I promise that its the experience not the feminist inside me that agrees that girls are easier than boys)

Teaching in Galle: This was probably one of the hardest things I have ever done, and definitely one of the most rewarding. There were only 5 kids and their English ability varied from being able to have a very basic conversation, to barely being able to write the alphabet. I was thrown into the deep end straight away, left entirely to my own devices with no one who spoke Sinhala (their national language) to aid me; but I was thankful for this, being eager to just immerse myself in the teaching. The kids were great! Ashan knew the most English and was keen to show off to the other kids, but they all obviously adored him and he never failed to help them out. Sila and Ratar were best friends with very limited English but always had a smile on their face and giggled and everything I said (although as I am not *that* funny it was probably just to create the impression that they understood what I was saying). Soma was shy and got frustrated easily so needed to be pacified but my favourite was Gothama. He was the oldest and clearly aware that he was also one of the weakest, and as a classic 15 year old boy was too embarrassed to join in the games but he was REALLY keen to learn and incredible diligent, refusing to give up until he got the answer right. I only taught them for 2 weeks (and trust me that was long enough) but I really got to know them and

frequently left the lesson with a huge smile on my face - especially when they ran onto the roof of the Monastery to wave me off every day.

Advice to anyone wanting to teach here: 2 hours is a long time to teach easily bored and distracted 11 year old boys so be patient, **don't let them dictate the class and be armed with sweets** to encourage them to answer questions. I brought my iPod to lessons and let them play on it in the breaks but regret this because as time wore on they demanded to play on it more and more frequently. The trick is to make sure that whatever you are doing is more interesting than their break (this is where the sweets come in). Engage the ones that are listening in a game where they can win sweets and you will soon attract the attention of the rest of them. Also, plan what you are going to do before the lesson and write it all down. **Make sure your lessons are interactive** with crosswords, word searches, Simon says, musical chairs ect and don't ever lecture, if 3 minutes go past when you haven't asked a question then you will lose them. **Bring lots of spare paper and pens to the lesson and prepare activities on paper the night before.** My most successful game was a vocab relay race, where they had to write every word to do with transport, clothes, numbers, days, months, body parts, countries ect as fast as possible, running to and from the paper and passing the pen to the next in the team. My most important piece of advice is "don't give up too early", my favourite lesson was one of the last ones the day after a particularly hard one so they are varied but trust me, if you persevere then you will find that it pays off!

Working in the Orphanage/Primary School: I loved this! The kids here are absolutely adorable and it is so easy to forget that they are orphans whose life will never be like ours. I spent 2 hours just singing to the 0-1 year olds whilst changing them and even in that time you really learn to know them. For instance, one girl needed to be sung to every time she started crying, one boy needed to be watched like a hawk in case he wriggled away, one boy needed a particular duck toy, another was likely to sit on other babies faces if he wasn't watched. The 1-3 year olds just want a bit of love. If you like the idea of spending two hours cuddling cute toddlers then you will love working here as they literally crawl into your lap and refuse to leave. One girl (we called her "cuddle girl" for obvious reasons) actually fell asleep in another volunteers arms. Again, I really formed relationships with these kids, learning what they liked and how I could help them - "Bubble girl" found it hilarious when the foam of the bubbles was wiped on her face, "Ball Boy" needed to run around before he would smile and so on. You might think that me not learning their names is strange but if you've ever been put in a pen with 30 3 year old children all wanting your attention then you will understand how completely exhausting and overwhelming it is. It was strange actually how much freedom we were given with the children. After the women got to know us, we were pretty much allowed to do anything, including changing nappies, mopping up wee, playing with the kids, feeding etc. The only things we were completely banned from doing was picking up the children, which was heart-breaking as that was what they wanted us to do most! The Primary school was pretty similar but for the kids aged 3-5 and I was surprised at how much English they knew at that age (considering I had no Sinhala).

Advice for anyone wanting to work here: **Not for people with a weak stomach!** The first thing that shocked me was the putrid smell of urine that hits you as soon as you walk into the room. You get used to it after a while but if you are remotely squeamish then a job involving nappy changes, cleaning pee whilst 10 children are trying to play in/eat it (no exaggeration) then this might not be for you. **Be prepared to not like some of the children.** Unless you are Mother Theresa then you will

undoubtedly find some of the kids annoying - especially the ones that rip your hair out, pull your trousers down, or wipe pee on you (sorry for the excessive mention of pee, however this is a pretty fair representation of the job). It doesn't make you a terrible person, but it does make you appreciate how hard it must be for the matrons who work here 24 hours a day. I had my favourites, (as you've probably guessed Bubble Girl, Cuddle Girl and Ball Boy features) because they were just such sweet kids. Bubble girl would blow bubbles on my face accidentally then wipe them off for me, Cuddle girl shared her snacks; whereas "Boy who kept pulling his trousers down" wasn't quite as memorable. **Bring presents**, bubbles went down a treat, and sweets and puppets were good too although make sure you have enough for all 30 children and keep track of who has had what. **Be prepared to get emotional!** It was only on my third day here when it properly hit me that these kids were orphans and that their life, no matter how happy they seemed, was pretty tragic compared with my childhood - most of them wouldn't even leave the orphanage until they were 5 years old and this was only to go to another one. One day that I will never forget had a simple moment where "Sailor Boy" accidentally bumped heads with another kid on the slide and was hit by the matron for it before every kid was banned from the slide. The boy cried out of pain and confusion and all I wanted to do was pick him up and cuddle him but of course I couldn't and when I got back home I just cried because of the sheer unfairness of it. I think working in an orphanage is really worth doing if not just to gain some (albeit brutal) perspective.

Rock Hill Meditation Hermitage: This was without a doubt my favourite thing of the entire trip. My dad came here 32 years ago when the present Chief monk Bhante (now 72) was still there so we had a lot to chat about and he loved the old photos I brought for him bringing back memories of the past. It was one of the most picturesque places that I have ever visited, situated on top of a hill overlooking the mountains. I went when there was no formal retreat on so there was only 5 other people there, one 23 year old British guy, a 29 year old Irish girl and 3 Belgium 20 year olds which was perfect for me as I got to know all of them really well and also had plenty of time to talk to Bhante and have one on one Q and A sessions on Buddhism and Meditation (which, as I am off to study world religions at Uni, was fascinating for me). We had a guided meditation lesson every morning for two hours, lunch at 11.30, teaching from 2-4 and a Dhamma talk (teaching) every evening at 6. The rest of the day was my oyster to talk to Bhante or the other people there, do some solitary meditation or (as I chose to) walk up to the top of the mountain to see the sunrise at 6am). The teaching here was SO MUCH BETTER than in Galle - shows how much difference an attentive class makes. The monks were 15 and 17 from Bangladesh and spoke English pretty well already so much so that Elliot (The Brit) and I just taught them what we found interesting; for Elliot it was the oil crisis, nutrition and green fuels, for me it was photosynthesis, the European Union and, of course, the Suffragette movement. They could not have been better pupils and each lesson ended with them saying "Thank you for teaching teacher". I thought that as monks they would be sombre and silent but of course they were just your average 15 year old giggly boys into wresting and video games, the only difference was that they lived in a monastery). I am now friends with all of them on Facebook (odd seeing a monk with Facebook) and am going to keep giving them lessons over Skype. But Bhante is an absolute babe and is a pretty big deal in Sri Lanka, even the President knows and adores him, so if you are at all interested in Buddhism then don't miss this opportunity to talk to a lovely monk who really knows his stuff.

If you are planning to go to Rock Hill: If you want a lot of guided meditation and other people there then go at the beginning of the month and book a place because that is when they have their 10 day

retreat (although you can probably leave early if you need/want to) but any time after that you can pretty much just turn up. When I was there, we were left to our own devices a bit which was fine for me because I like to practise alone but some of the others felt that they needed a little more guidance. Its \$20 a day for food and electricity (but they really aren't strict about it - they didn't even ask me for the money but I had such an amazing time that I wanted to give them something). If you go around the 25th of September there is a huge elephant festival in the local village that serendipitously fell on my birthday and was amazing! We were even given VIP access into some of the temples because we were with a group of monks. Read a lot when you are there, it really gives you an insight into Buddhism and was so helpful to enhance my understanding.

The most memorable moment: Probably the best part of my trip was building a proper relationship with some of the locals. There is a turtle hatchery centre about 5 minutes' walk up the road where we made friends with the family that runs it. It started that we would just pop by and say hello (they also had 4 tiny 3 month old puppies that we found a lot more interesting than the turtles...) and then they gave us tea and coconuts. Then they invited us around for supper a couple of times and took us shopping for Sari's. Initially we were of course suspicious because they were incredibly poor (5 family members sharing one room just big enough to fit in 2 double beds pushed together) and we were obviously wealthy westerners. However they refused to accept a dime from either of us and wouldn't let us buy them anything except a few sweets for the kids. It was at that moment that I realised that I really needed to stop being quite so suspicious and just accept everyone at face value - we're all people after all. In the end, Juliane (the other volunteer) and I bought them a water pump (the only thing they said that they really needed) so that the father didn't have to walk to the sea 40 times a day to refresh the turtle tanks. It was probably one of the best moments of my life actually when we handed over the cheque and the mother started crying, the kids all hugged us and the dad just sat there dumbfounded. I suppose that's one of the things you learn about travelling to less wealthy places, that very little effort on your part can make a colossal difference to the lives of the less fortunate. The family have just sent me photos of their new water pump (which cost less than the average Top Shop article) with blessings and thanks and again gave me a much needed perspective.

Money Tips: £1 is 213 Rupees so everything is dirt cheap but don't go crazy and spend all your money at once because there is always something else to buy. They ALWAYS charge tourists twice as much as the locals so barter like your life depends upon it. A pair of harem trousers shouldn't be more than 500R, 800R at a push and they will probably rip up the crotch seam - but you will buy loads because they are so pretty. If you get sent to the same place as me then you will be offered a 4 day trip around Sri Lanka that costs £200 not including lunch and dinner (but you can get a steak for 3pounds so that's really not an issue). This is definitely worth doing but all the places you go to are very touristy and expect you to buy something (even if it is a "free" tour) so bring plenty of money. I spent about £300 in four weeks on everything (transport, presents, food, stuff for me etc) and I was averagely thrifty (although probably didn't need the 50th Lion Beer or the 6th pair of trousers...). Also you will have to pay for Air Conditioning at £12 a week (divided by however many volunteers there are).

Travel Tips: You have to pay for all your transport here which wasn't a major issue, but it's worth budgeting for; To get to the orphanage and back it is 500R which you can split with the other volunteers, to get to the main town its 200R and to get to the internet cafe (you will definitely use

this) train station and bus station its 150R - if you are going somewhere you don't know then ask your host family to tell you how much it usually costs and always agree on a price with the Tuc-Tuc driver before you get in. Trains and buses are SO CHEAP so you don't need to worry about this, but the bus driver never tells you the truth when you ask how long it will take. Galle to Colombo is 3.5 hours by bus NOT 1 hour as the bus driver told me. If you go on a train then DEFINITLY sit by the "door" - the speech marks indicate the complete lack of door which is what makes the trip so amazing, you can literally stick your legs out of the train as it journeys across Sri Lanka and the views are beautiful!

General Tips: There really isn't much opportunity to go out after dark and it gets dark at 6.30 so bring a diary, books and cards and **don't feel awkward when you want to go to bed at 9.30** - the days are very long and tiring and the rape culture is still very prevalent so you can't really go out after dark. When I was there, a British woman was raped and her partner was assaulted, both ending up in hospital in the next town along. However, if you go to Colombo, go on Friday night to the bar on Hospital Street near Colombo Fort Hostel and look for Thusitha and his wife. These guys are the craziest groupies I have ever met and we had a cracking night with them. **Check the weather** before you go (I just missed the rainy season and the weather was perfect but the one day where it really hammered down was pretty miserable. **Check to see how many other volunteers there are.** I went out wanting to not be a tourist and experience real Sri Lanka (yes I know, very gap yah) so I didn't really want loads of volunteers but I ended up craving a bit more human interaction and this was probably one of the reasons I enjoyed Rock Hill so much. **Don't be surprised that you eat alone**, it is Sri Lankan culture that they never eat with their guests, and also most people don't talk when they are eating either - a big change from the West but actually quite a welcome one for me. Most importantly, **don't be afraid of the locals.** Yes some of them will try to cheat you out of money, and if anyone asks you for "milk powder" for their daughter dying of polio you can be pretty certain that they want drug money; but don't be too suspicious because most of them are just genuinely friendly people. Everyone smiles, some people want photos with you because you are a foreigner, most people will ask you where you are from and you will have countless conversations along the lines of "Where are you from" "England" "Ahhhh, Cricket!"

What I learnt from Sri Lanka: I hate to be cliché but there is a reason that people say that travelling gives you perspective. This trip really did bring home not only how lucky I am, but also how easy it is to help other people. I now can't say, as so many people do, that I can't afford to give money to every beggar I see, because that is just not true, I could afford to, I just chose to spend the money on myself. From now on I am going to try not to do that and luckily I have the memory of giving the water pump to the turtle family and the overwhelming emotional response it received to remind me how good it feels to do genuinely good and things. I now know that I really love teaching, just not to only 11 year old boys, and how much difference it makes to a teacher when kids actually want to learn (all students take note). I realise how important human contact and relationships are, between friends, family and even more obscure links like that with a Chief monk or a class of Bangladeshi school children are; this trip just wouldn't have been the same had it not been for the personal interactions I had with others and what I learnt from them. Probably most importantly for me was the religious revelation I had. I don't mean this in the sense of a "religious experience" or "epiphany", more that I realised that Buddhism is not for me. I went to Sri Lanka with the primary intention of experiencing and learning about Buddhism to try and see if it was a religion or philosophy that I would like to follow (being currently undecided about my religious preference). But

Buddhism is too focused on non-attachment to end suffering, and I have decided (throughout the course of this trip) that whilst attachment and craving undoubtedly causes suffering, I think I would rather tolerate the latter so that I could have the former, than just renounce all human relationships. Therefore I can cross Buddhism off my list, only Judaism, Hinduism and Islam to go - bring on the Middle East!