

Jan - Jul 2015

Volunteering in Kolkata, then backpacking through Southern India, Rajasthan and SE Asia (Thailand and Laos)

Right from the beginning of our planning, we decided that we did not want to use a GAP year organisation to find voluntary work placements. We did a lot of research in to charities in India and in the end decided to do a stint of work for the Mother Teresa missionaries of Charity in Kolkata. This charity is quite unique as it accepts volunteers on a daily basis. In the 'top 5 things to do in Kolkata', doing a day of volunteering at this charity features as number 1. This was one of the things that had a huge influence on our experience of working at this charity. Although we were there for a prolonged period of time, there were different volunteers arriving each day, only working for 1 or 2 days.

Kolkata was a serious shock when we first arrived. It is a completely mad place, demonstrated by the fact that their one way road system changes direction every day at 1pm. You can imagine the chaos that ensues... One of the first things we noticed was the lack of women on the streets. Although we knew that there was a lot of female work going on behind the scenes, it was strange to be in a place that was entirely male dominated. It meant that we received a lot of attention walking around as a group of four white females in a place that had comparatively few tourists compared to residents. The evident lack of opportunities for women made us realise just how much we take for granted living in a society where we live and work as equals to men.

After a few days of getting to grips with Kolkata, we enrolled at the Mother Teresa Foundation (nearly bumping into the Dalai Lama on our way!). In our induction, it was explained to us that there were 6 different houses where we could work. These included separate houses for: disabled men, disabled girls, the dying and the destitute, the sick, and two orphanages. We were assigned to 'Shanti Dan', which was a house for Disabled Girls.

Each day started with morning prayers and breakfast at MotherHouse, where Mother Teresa had lived. This was a half an hour walk away and started at 7am, and so the 6:15 wake-up was a bit of a shock to the system! We were by no means the first people awake and ready though, as we seemed to be walking to work during 'rush hour'. Their version of rush hour however consisted of bicycles with 50 chickens tied to the sides, human-rickshaws taking children to school, and people queueing up to use the water supply to wash on the side of the street. After our breakfast of a banana and some masala chai, we got a local bus every day to Shanti Dan which could take anything from 20 minutes to over an hour. Despite catching the bus twice a day for weeks, it never failed to amaze us quite how many people they could squeeze onto one bus. We were living on the more affluent side of the city (in comparison), but Shanti Dan involved a journey through some of the roughest parts. We went via the train station, with a slum right next to it, which gave us an idea of both how many people were actually living in Kolkata, and also the conditions that they were managing to survive in.

Once we had arrived we would collect our aprons and head straight to the washing room on the ground floor to help the Mashi. The Mashi were Indian women employed by the charity to help run the houses. Many of them had been raised in the nearby slum and still returned there after work, but others had been raised in the Mother Teresa orphanage and were now working to earn money to help support their families. Everyday, under the watchful eyes of the Mashi we would help them wash all 72 bed sheets and changes of clothes from the day before in the 3 large washing basins. The conditions of the girls meant that this daily ritual was unavoidable. We then carried them up three floors to the roof to hang them out to dry. The Mashi only spoke Bengali and no English, so at first it was a real challenge to understand what we were being asked to do. Hanging up the washing was a complex operation which the Mashi took extremely seriously. We got to grips with the system after a while but it was a source of continual disruption that there were different volunteers coming in every day that had to be taught what to do. Some days, we definitely felt that the extremely short term volunteers were more of a hindrance than a help, and that the 'tourist attraction' element of the charity had its shortfalls.

Once the washing was completed, we were free to spend time with the girls. Shanti Dan was split into five classrooms according to ability. The Stars were visually impaired/blind, The Rainbows were severely physically challenged, The Flowers were the most able bodied and were learning at the level of primary school, Birds were dynamic and energetic with non-verbal communication, The Butterflies were autistic with severe learning disabilities and finally The Angels were severely physically and mentally challenged, most of whom were in wheelchairs. We spent most of our time working in the Birds and Flowers classrooms as this was where we could be of the most use. We would help them write simple English phrases and words as well as simple addition and subtraction. The appearance of the girls and the level at which they were working meant that for the first couple of days we assumed they were all under the age of ten. 3 days later, when we were shown a list of them all along with their ages, we discovered that their ages spanned from about 30-50. This was a huge shock and we realized the extent of their lack of physical development.

This lack of physical development and mental capacity meant that when it came to food, each girl (apart from about 10, who had been taught to use a spoon), had to be fed by the volunteers. This process took an extremely long time, and at first we were quite shocked with the force of the Mashi when it came to feeding them. We realised quite quickly however, that if this force wasn't exerted, the girls would simply not eat. After the girls had been fed they had to be changed and put to bed. After a while we learned to dispel any feelings of awkwardness or self-consciousness, but at the beginning we felt very under qualified. It seemed bizarre that we were in charge of taking these women to the toilet, feeding them and putting them to bed when we had no experience of people with severe disabilities. However, after pondering this it became obvious that volunteers, despite being under qualified, allowed the charity to function.

Working there for a substantial amount of time felt a lot more satisfying than the volunteers who would come for one or two days and then leave again. It took us

a long time to feel genuine enthusiasm towards going to work everyday. Perhaps this was because of the lack of recognition – it was obvious, certainly at the beginning, that the girls had no concept of who we were and the fact that they had met us before. However, the longer we spent with them, the more connections we established. Sundays fostered these small connections the most as after having done the washing, the girls had no lessons, so we would paint their nails, plait their hair and play with them outside. It allowed us to see the smallest improvements in the girls' abilities, which made our time feel all the more worthwhile. We started to know our way around a lot better and learn the routine and it meant that we felt a lot more comfortable with both the girls and the Mashi. Once they realised we weren't leaving after only a few days, the Mashi started trusting us and started delegating a lot more responsibilities.

On our last day we were given a lovely send off by all the girls, the Mashi and Sisters, where they sung to us and presented us with small gifts. It was a really special way to finish our time there but we felt so sad leaving the girls behind, knowing that their lives would simply carry on in the same way. It was an experience that we continued to reflect on during the rest of our trip, when we realised just how lucky we were to be doing such extraordinary things. Despite having such fond memories of our time there overall, it was by no means an easy ride. There is quite a lot of controversy about the lack of medical help that the charity gives. We definitely felt this sometimes as it was clear that some of the girls needed medical help, beyond what the Mother Teresa charity could provide. However, we felt that overall the care that the charity provides for people who would otherwise have nothing, far outweighs any concerns about the type of care being provided.

After an incredibly eye opening but tiring time in Kolkata, we spent the rest of our time traveling around Southern India, Rajasthan and then onto South East Asia. To write about all our adventures would take forever, but if you want a bit more of an idea, we kept a blog for our 6 months - www.flockoffour.tumblr.com. There are also a great deal of photos on here which span our whole trip. Keeping this up in itself was a bit of a task, but on returning home, we are all incredibly glad that we have a detailed description of where we've been and some photos to remember all of our favourite places. After lots of discussing and changing of plans our eventual route ended up as below, but we will just talk about a few places where the extra funding really helped our trip achieve its true potential!

Kolkata~Varkala~Alleppey~Cochin~Munnar~Hampi~Goa~Udaipur~Jaisalmer
~Jodhpur~Pushkar~Jaipur~Bundi~Agra~Delhi~Bangkok~Pai~
ChiangMai~Bangkok~Yangon~Bagan~InleLake~Hsipaw~Mandalay~
Bangkok~Chiang Mai~Chiang Rai~Huay Xay~Luang Namtha~Nong
Khiaw~Luang Prabang~Vang Vieng~Hanoi~Halong Bay~Hoi An~Nha
Trang~Mui Ne~Ho Chi Minh~Phnom Penh~Otres Beach~Koh Rong~Siem
Reap~Koh Toa~Koh Phangan~Phuket~Bangkok

With the help of the funding we received we were able to go beyond the 'usual route' in South East Asia. We had a particularly active and exciting time in Laos, exploring the more remote but incredibly beautiful parts. After crossing the

border from Northern Thailand at Chang Rai, we made our way to Huay Xay, a tiny border town in Laos. Here we took part in the 'Gibbon Experience' - www.gibbonexperience.org, a three day adventure of trekking and zip lining through the jungle. In the evenings we stayed in tree houses carefully balanced high up in the trees. We zip lined into our huts for the night, which was an amazing feeling, and ate simple Laos food of steamed rice, vegetables and fish. In the day, the walking got very tiring but was worth it when we reached a high point and our guide told us it was time for a zip wire! Soaring above the canopy was the most exhilarating feeling and we got a sense of the huge scale of the forest. Our guide told us lots about how the forest is under threat from Chinese mining and logging companies, who are buying the land of the Laos government for resources and road access. This was some of the most beautiful scenery we saw in Asia, and given how worried the locals are about its future, we felt incredibly lucky to be able to witness it as of yet undestroyed. This experience was definitely a highlight of our trip, and although we were exhausted by the end, we felt like we had explored truly untouched areas and seen the true beauty of the natural world.

The Mekong River in Laos has always been essential in order for infrastructure to function efficiently. We kayaked along it for a day, and we also took a boat trip down the river from Nong Khiaw to Luang Prabang. This involved getting off the boat for about an hour and being driven for an hour around one of the dams that the Chinese had built. It was so shocking to see the huge destruction that it had caused, and was sickening to know that it was only one of seven being built. The landscape around it was filled with huge slogans of 'Power China', which contrasted with the extraordinarily naturally beautiful landscape. In light of having seen this, Lucinda then used this cause as one of 3 political banners painted for Glastonbury festival (see photo attached).

We were incredibly lucky to have the opportunity to visit Myanmar for three weeks. We felt that this was a unique time to visit the country, just months before the election and at a time where it has only recently been opened to tourism. We had an incredibly authentic experience of the Burmese culture due to the fact that visited just at the time of the Water Festival. We saw very few other Western people because visiting the country at this time is usually advised against – all transport stops and most shops and restaurants are closed. However, our schedule meant that we either had to go then or not at all and so we decided to brave it! It turned out to be the most wonderful decision as we effectively took part in a five day water fight with the local people. Most of our exploration of the beautiful landscape was done on foot or on bicycle and even by long boat, the traditional model for a Burmese fishing boat.

We are hugely grateful for the grant that we received as it enabled us to travel to places and experience things that may have not otherwise been possible. It provided the funds for us to push on to remote places that went beyond the generally travelled route around India and South East Asia.