

(August)

12 days until I leave for Sri Lanka, the destination that kicks off my gap year. It's a unique opportunity so I want to do it properly. However these final 12 days will probably consist of last minute packing, meeting friends and day dreaming about the mountains and hot weather. Mostly working out at the gym though, coz who actually enjoys seeing a skinny guy in a vest?

My gap year begins with turtle conservation in South Sri Lanka before crossing the border into Cambodia to volunteer at a school, with the chance to visit some great sights and monuments as well. From January 2015, the crock bank in India will be my home for 3 months with even more reptile conservation (feeding the crocodiles would be a chance to show off my exceptional Australian accent). For the final 3 months of my trip, I'll be teaching English to school children in Nepal. I feel like fitting these countries into the song "From Paris to Berlin" by Infernal...

A lot of people are jealous. In fact, I keep getting told how much of a big deal it is. Honestly, it really is so mixed emotions are running wild at the moment. It's got to the stage where I'm a bit scared. Why? Because after months of waiting, it's finally a reality and I've never done this kind of thing before. I've wanted to travel the world since I was a kid but as this is the first time it makes it that extra bit special. Watching YouTube videos from Fun for Louis and Mr Ben Brown have motivated me and made me realise what I'd be missing out on if I was going straight to Uni instead.

Speaking of Uni... I'm obviously worried about that as well, not to mention when I'll get to do Gold DofE and get my driving license. Helping other people should clear my mind from this and teach me that there are better things I should focus on. The gap guru projects in Cambodia and Nepal help improve the lives of so many less fortunate children therefore you can only be grateful for what you have. It's reminiscent of karma. Who knows – saving the turtles in Sri Lanka could just get me into Manchester University. I can only dream.

Anyway, the whole year ahead is exhilarating and daunting at the same time, but that's life.

Till then.

(August)

My first week in Sri Lanka has been a week placement in Kandy with other volunteers. I'm friends with the only two British people here and everyone else can speak English so it's a welcoming atmosphere. The week has been enjoyable because of the range of activities, organised schedule and the chance to eat meals in the evenings with your friends. You can end up talking to Canadians, Australians, the Dutch, Italians, Germans, Americans and Chinese volunteers.

On Monday morning we learnt some phrases in the local language, questions on Buddhism/local culture and any queries about projects or contact details. There was even self-defence classes for the women as well.

The next morning our group were invited to a local family house and fortunate to have a typical Sri Lankan meal cooked for us. We all took part in creating a large meal that we would end up eating with our hands. Sounds funny, but there's more to it than you think. The afternoon was spent at the spice gardens learning about the uses of indigenous plants. The plants in these gardens are used for improving hair removal creams, sun cream, pepper (other spices) and cures for backpain.

On Wednesday we enjoyed going to a gem stone shop, got to learn about the history through a short film and had the opportunity to buy rings. We got a boat ride of the famous Kandy lake as well where camodo dragons were spotted out to us by the co-ordinator.

Thursday included a session in mediation (which is a part of Buddhist practise) and an in depth lecture on the principles of Buddhism with an English monk. I took a lot out of it and I think everyone else did as well.

Friday was really interesting as we visited two temples in Kandy. One being built into a large Buddha statue for the Buddhists. There were some stunning views at the top of the statue of Kandy and you could see large mountains in the jungles, as Central Sri Lanka is well known for its trekking. We shared tea and crackers with the head monk before being blessed (white wrist bands). What a contrast this significant temple had with the outstanding Muslim temple we visited. Smaller in size, yet worshipped by many. Sri Lanka is home to Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism and Christianity so it's important to remind yourself of this. Later we had an Indian meal and a massage to rap it off.

Weekends are free for travelling, but my Sunday morning will consist of an early train ride down to Ambalangoda for the turtle project. Till then

(6th September)

It's been an exciting week so I haven't had much time to blog. It's nearly the end of August and the temperature has been about 30 degrees every day except Friday. I'm loving the fact that the accommodation is a 30 second walk from both of the sanctuaries and it's not that far into the city by foot.

When I arrived on the Sunday I was greeted by a lot of volunteers. It was raining at the time so I spoke to friends I had made from Greenhouse from the orientation week. The following Monday morning is known as an observation day where the volunteers aren't allowed to touch the turtles for biting reasons. Later we got to feed all the turtles as my group dealt with the more severely disabled turtles. Some are missing fins or blind, although the better looking ones have usually swallowed plastic bags. I think I ended up feeding mafia boss, Jasmine and Buddy (imaginative names created by other volunteers).

Tuesday morning involved washing the tanks with high tech equipment referred to as water and sand. Often, "balloon" (puffa) fish are used in the tanks to get rid of dust. This conservation site is managed by friendly and very humorous individuals. So too is 'The Captain', but he prioritises the safety of all his volunteers and is extremely approachable. After scrubbing the tanks down, some of us managed to get the afternoon off so we could explore Yalle National park. A 4 hour drive, hotel and safari was organised successfully by the captain. We had to get up at 5AM for a 5 hour safari where we saw Leopards, elephants, crocodiles and warthog. Elephants retreat at this time of year because of limited water holes though. We arrived back at Ambalangoda just in time to see young turtles get released into the wild. A very cute experience and this usually happens once a week after a full moon in Sri Lanka.

Thursday morning involved cleaning the tanks again and talking to tourists about the different species of turtle. The relaxed atmosphere allows tourists to sometimes wonder in and learn more. Unfortunately there was no work on the Friday because rainwater is bad for sea turtles. It was an opportunity to socialise with other volunteers in the dining room. A visit to the tsunami museum this weekend is a must and new volunteers should arrive this Sunday. Till then

(23rd September)

I've finally finished my 3 week project with the turtles in Ambalangoda and it's been an unforgettable experience. The fact that my name will always be on the wall in paint means that my contribution will last a lifetime.

A three week placement at the turtle sanctuary is an appropriate amount of time if you're interested in animal conservation like I am. However don't expect anything too advanced with data analysis or scientific research. The project fits the Sri Lankan lifestyle as it's very relaxed and nothing too difficult.

For travellers who want to experience the rare opportunity to release young turtles, look after them and take photos with them (which tourists aren't allowed to do) then a week placement would be ideal as you get to do all the jobs on offer in that time period. The two sanctuaries are right on the beach, so you can always chill on the white sand – the perfect place to take a break.

My responsibilities have been feeding blind, disabled and beautiful species of turtle. A typical week will involve feeding 3 times a week with a range of fish. A lot of the time though I've contributed to scrubbing the tanks when the water has been released. It's backbreaking work, but rewarding and 'the more you put in, the more satisfaction you get out of it.' Finally the chance to release young turtles was truly awesome. Not many people get to do it, but at Ambalangoda volunteers get to do it properly.

I'm off to back pack round Sri Lanka this week as it's such a diverse country. Till then

Strolling across the border: (28th September)

I've officially joined the long list of tourists and volunteers that cross the border from Thailand into Cambodia. When I arrived at Bangkok airport I was pretty amazed by how big it was. I collected my luggage after I went through passport security (where I got the blank visa on arrival card). They seemed a bit confused that I didn't know an address I could stay at in Bangkok so I just said that I would be there for 1 day and they were fine with that. My flight had been arranged in advance without considering how long the border crossing would take. If you're considering crossing the border into Cambodia I suggest you get a flight that arrives into Bangkok very early or just book a close by hotel in advance for the night. Fortunately I had a family friend who lives in Bangkok so I stayed there for the evening. I got a sim card at the airport for about £8 and headed down to the taxi service where I experienced a long journey though the large city of Bangkok. I had to pay £1 and £3 tolls on top of the taxi fee as well. The great thing about my stay with the family was that it was only a 20 minute drive to Chatuchak bus terminal. It's important you ask for this and you'll recognise it straight away with the huge sign above the station. Be aware not to get the Aranyaprathiet bus ticket on the outside counter (it was closed when I went there anyway). You have to go into the station and head directly towards the counters along the back – You want window number 22. The ticket cost me 220 baht but it depends which company you go with.

The bus journey started at 6:15am and they buses run every hour, but make sure you've got a fully charged iPod with you. My bus arrived at 11:20 and I used a GPS to make sure I knew when to get off. The driver will probably tell you when to get off anyway if you're a tourist. I had a large rucksack on my back and a Phillipine woman who was going to extend her visa in Thailand offered to help me carry my extra luggage. She knew where to go so it saved a bit of money on the tuk tuk (with the tuk tuk you should not get off at the Cambodian Consulate in Aranyaprathet by the way). We crossed a disused railway and turned left into the Thai immigration passport checkpoint. Outside the rather narrow entrance were a couple of scam artists telling us to head over in a different direction. If you want pictures of what to look for – head to the website where it's literally called howtogetcambodia.com.

We headed down the blue open hallway and eventually got to the Thailand departure checkpoint where the queue took about 40 minutes. It's important to have your departure card filled out before you get it stamped (passport number, name, etc). When we got through we went down the stairs and walked across the river that divides Thailand and Cambodia. On the right hand side after the kingdom of Cambodia welcome arch is a white building which is where I paid for my visa on arrival. Two options here: pay for it in dollars plus an extra 100 baht or simply pay for it in baht. It wasn't over here as we had to go to the Cambodian Passport checkpoint which is very easy to find if you keep walking straight ahead. I got my passport stamped for the date of entry and I met Joel afterwards. The bus station is roughly 500 metres from here if you wish to do that. This was a

small adventure that I can now be proud of. So I'm in Cambodia now for 3 months and consciously aware of the land mines as everyone keeps telling me.

Till then!

Get Active! (13th October)

I've been living in Cambodia for almost three weeks now even though it doesn't feel that long. Time flies by when you're having fun as there has been so much going on during the end of September and beginning of October. The first week of my time here was more of a culture experience as the schools were closed for the week long holiday. This holiday was for people from Battambang to go back to their home villages and celebrate (party). I didn't get too involved with that but that week was a good opportunity to explore the small city and find out the best restaurants, supermarkets, phone shops and local markets.

During my first week of volunteer work I arranged to teach half an hour of life skills and teach English in the morning before teaching English and coaching sport in the afternoon. A great routine that I had planned with the local co-ordinators as I'm also helping extend the teaching curriculum at CAD 1 (Child Action for Development). The children always smile and got to know me quickly during the first week. As I grew in confidence I was able to teach lessons by myself and teach simple songs that they like to sing, i.e. "wash wash wash your hands" to the tune of "row your boat". The sport and activity club after school has been very enjoyable for myself and the kids. Unfortunately I can't run that much in this heat, although the kids run non-stop and play football with their bare feet. I've got them into a routine of starting with a warm up and then doing a couple of fun football drills with them to improve their kicking and passing.

In my second week of volunteering in Battambang I've taught about the importance of flowers in life skills sessions. The kids have drawn lots of pictures, sang songs and learnt new vocabulary through hangman. In English lessons it's a good idea to get them talking about themselves so they copy down sentences with a personal touch as I sometimes leave spaces blank for names, hair colour and hobbies. I've been joined by a couple of Americans called Don and Theo who are also on their gap years and their presence has helped with the sport and activities afterschool club. Throughout the week we've done a drill that has enhanced one-on-one situations so I want to build on that next week with some teamwork activities. Don and Theo think they enjoy Frisbee so we will encourage some creative activities in the next few weeks. I'll have a discussion soon with the local co-ordinators about making the after school club a permanent thing as it's the first time most of them have had sports sessions, so the children clearly love my coaching role. We want to make this club sustainable by hopefully training a young assistant who can run great activities and sport drills in the future. Battambang also has a disused airport which is used for monthly football tournaments between different NGO's so it would be great to get them involved with that as well.

Myself, Don and Theo did the Bamboo train on Friday morning and visited the crocodile farm. I can honestly say that crocodiles are some of the most incredible creatures!

Till then!

Angkor WHAT ARE YOU EATING!?! (25th October)

On Friday afternoon, Theo, Donen and I headed down to Siem reap. Before we embarked on our three hour bus ride, Donen had managed to leave his ticket back at the volunteer house. He rushed back in the tuk tuk and

got back just in time. When we arrived at the siem reap bus station we asked for the cheapest accommodation and that's pretty what we got. Our tuk tuk driver, known as 'Ladykiller', drove us to our decent looking hotel and we ended up paying \$8 each for two nights. That night we headed to the night market (or the bargain market as I like to call it) where I found a crocodile wallet for \$3. The guys also dared me to eat a fried tarantula that was being sold on the street. The legs were pretty tasty, although the inside of it was something else!

The following morning we had brunch at the hotel and phoned the 'ladykiller' to arrange a tuk tuk for us for the day. This was the beginning of an awesome trek round the famous Angkor watt temples which is something everyone has to do in my opinion. Our first stop was the main Angkor watt temple where we began by wondering down some forest paths that had monkeys and water buffalo. By midday I was starting to regret the fact I was wearing a white T-shirt as the sun shines down on you for the whole day. I went to pose for a photo with the Angkor wat temple and dropped my water bottle, only for it to be stolen a few seconds later. The heat drives some people crazy I guess even though it was only 28 degrees. Walking inside the magnificent architectural piece was a real luxury and it felt like we could spend the whole day exploring this specific temple. All the man-made carvings were so consistently accurate that I would end up taking the same photos, however pictures and words don't justify how unreal it is. Our next stop was the Bayon temple in Angkor Thom. This was a nice place to wonder around because it felt a bit magical with all the Buddhist head statues. Our final stop was the legendary Ta Prohm – home to Tomb raider and passionate photographers. I fell in love with this place and I could probably live there for the rest of my life, easily. These old ruins are tangled in the roots of 400 year old sponge trees so this mix of jungle and ancient ruins creates a delightful spectacle for anyone. I found Donen just before the gate closure and we climbed up, down, through and over these ruins – complete tomb raider style. A great way to wrap up the day!

Til then!

There and back again... (November)

It's been a busy week so I've got plenty to catch up on!

I'll start by saying that I was invited on the volunteer trip to Phnom Penh on the 5th November for the water festival. Volunteering in Battambang at this time of year is great because the rainy season starts to die down and there are lots of festivals. The water festival in Cambodia is when there are national boat races to celebrate the river changing course. We went down on the Wednesday morning and endured a 7 hour bus journey. That night we chilled at mad monkey for a bit before checking out the concerts. Thursday morning I had to apply for my 6 month Indian (tourist) visa so I didn't see my passport again till the following Wednesday. Whilst the other volunteers were there we saw the Killing fields, boat races, Central markets, Russian markets and the mall where we went bowling.

Everyone left on Sunday morning, but Donen and Theo stayed until Monday because they had their Mekong river cruise to Vietnam. Life's hard isn't it. During that time I did my own exploring and met up with another volunteer I did turtle conservation with in Sri Lanka this year. She convinced me to travel to Koh Rong or Rabbit island off of Kep where you can swim with glow in the dark plankton at night – I'm already planning for that next adventure! That same day I went to the Genocide museum, but it's difficult to put into words how harsh it was. Personally, it was more devastating than the killing fields. I walked about 5km's to the Orussey markets afterwards, although I enjoyed it because Phnom penh is so compact and not over developed. In the evening I took a tuk tuk to Wat Phnom. A beautiful temple on a lush green hill where I received my first Cambodian blessing as the sun set. I you have enough time and money – I got told to check out silk island which is meant to look excellent in the evenings.

On Wednesday afternoon I collected my Indian visa and passport. Whilst I was in the waiting room a Japanese hippy was convinced that I looked American. She was also shocked that I had never experienced “love” before as she boasted about her amazing, backpacking, open minded, music-loving, hipster boyfriend from ...Coventry. It then took me an hour on the tuk tuk to get from the embassy to the bus station. Had I not got on that bus I would have had to extend my Cambodian visa in Phnom Penh and miss out on more volunteering.

The next morning I extended my Cambodian visa at the police office in Battambang so I won't see my passport for another week as it has to be sent to Phnom Penh. It feels like I don't even exist or that my true identity remains in Phnom Penh – maybe it's a sign! When I got back I went to Wat Banan with Alaine and Jasmine. Luckily we didn't slip on any of the wat banana steps. Even though it was a long tuk tuk ride out of town, it was worth every bit! Alaine was saying to us that she could stay in Cambodia for a lifetime it's so beautiful. A minute later she found out that she lost her part time job back home on Facebook.

In the evening we went out for dinner at the famous Chinese noodle man of Battambang followed by a trip to the circus. Superb acting that was hilarious with wonderful acrobatic skills.

The final day of the week was volunteer work for me at CAD1. It feels like the kids have missed me, especially when they give me drawings, hugs and smiles. I love this country.

'till then.

(December)

I departed from England 3 months, 3 weeks and 3 days ago to travel Asia. Since then I've met a lot of people, made lots of memories and now have my own stories to share with people back home. I've completed 14 weeks of volunteer work on my gap year so far, with 10 weeks of teaching English in Cambodia.

My days are made up of half an hour life skill sessions from nine-thirty and English for an hour in the mornings. I teach English to a class before and after lunch (this is optional though – it depends how early you like your mornings).

Life skills sessions include topics such as road safety, hygiene, hydration, job aspirations, conversation and teamwork with kids aged eight to ten. On Fridays, we learn new games to aid with learning English. Ten weeks at this project has been ideal because it's allowed plenty of time for the kids to become familiar with me as a person. I'm confident enough to go through a structured lesson with the odd bit of hangman as well. Of course I can't forget about the solid ten minutes of songs at the end of each lesson. At the volunteer house there's a log book to record topics that have been taught as the curriculum is being extended. Whilst I was teaching 'where' type questions the other day I wrote out “where are you going out tonight?” on the white board to which a student responded by saying he'd be chilling with his mates at Here Be Dragons, before playing a few rounds of pool at Ganesha...unfortunately their English isn't quite at that level yet. However, when it is on point they always deserve an angry bird sticker and a smiley face.

The after school activity club is progressing nicely and it's satisfying to know that it will continue to run when Joel and I leave soon. I look forward to coming back some day to see how other volunteers improve it further. Last week, we had a great game of 'soccer' with all the Australian volunteers. The highlight of that game was when I got tackled, flew up in the air and landing on my chin. The kids call me angry bird now (I feel that name's going to stick for a while sadly). The field has been cut which gives it that smell of English cricket pitches; get your bats out Cambodia!

Lots of people have got involved with making bamboo goals so that we can train on four smaller pitches which will enhance the kids' skills.

It feels so good to be in an environment where no-one feels stressed. I always experience a positive amount of energy from within and it's not hard to see why so many people refuse to leave this beautiful region. Thailand and Sri Lanka have been touted as the 'land of smiles', although this for me is the nation that smiles the most.

Till then,

'Coach Fraddie

Croc Bank blog #1 (January)

Firstly, I'd like to say that I'm really enjoying my time here on campus. The accommodation is nice, there's a beach and the curries are pretty damn good. I've been looking forward to this project and it's definitely lived up to expectations! Weekends involve working but I got some time off on one day so I'll tell you about how this weekend went.

I spent Saturday morning by helping out with the clearing up activities where I get to go inside the crocodile enclosures (pens) and check for litter or any unusual activity. Just before we finished I got stopped by a group of young Indians who all wanted my photo. You'll be surprised by how common it happens over here! At least they shake your hand afterwards, as if you've won a Nobel prize or something. I had breakfast with the staff, then went to the crocodile nursery to note down the temperature readings in five different sectors. This is one of my projects which involves making observations about the crocodiles' behaviour four times a day. My other project is similar because I'm monitoring the same species of crocodile, except this one is thirteen feet long. His name is Charles if you're wondering. Charles has his own dry land and aquarium so I monitor how long he spends time underwater, at the surface and dry land. I'm also drawing some of the species so they can be used for T-shirts and references for students. They really appreciate drawings at the croc bank.

On Sunday we cleaned out the muck in one of the pens with shovels and spades which I enjoyed. It feels a bit like a cricket match because we're set a target of how much there is and we'll stop for a tea break if it's too much. I haven't played much cricket here yet, although I'm getting to grips with the local language. "vannakom" means hello\goodbye and "nandri" means thanks. Unfortunately I said 'nandi' to a guy and he burst into hysterics because it means crab! On Sunday afternoon I took a couple of buses and a tuk tuk into Chennai so I could go watch the ATP tennis tournament. It was an amazing event and I got to see Wawrinka win the final.

Til then!

(January)

"We're going on a snake hunt"

I can't say I've ever been on a bear hunt but I imagine that book would have a rather dramatic ending to it in real life. It should probably be added to the 'bunny suicide' collection or labelled with 'Don't try this at home, kids!' Well, on Wednesday morning I joined the zoologists from the Czech Republic on an adventure to search for snakes. Venomous snakes.

Most reptiles are nocturnal and we wanted to find active snakes in the wild with our cameras and torches. Not knowing what to expect I naturally felt a bit nervous. The team looked in bushes and behind walls, but there were only frogs to be seen here. Eventually we came across a lake, although we couldn't go over it, ... therefore we went around it, obviously. Why would you go through a lake? At that moment, the sun came out and mixed with the mist on the horizon to create a wonderful view. The sun was a large beach ball in the sky wishing us luck on our quest. Pongal celebrations had just begun so the locals were burning their rubbish into the

atmosphere to worship the god of wealth. I felt very thankful to the Hindu gods for such a lovely image. It was getting brighter and I was starting to feel the heat a little. Maybe it was foolish of me to take only one water bottle. Still, could've been worse.

A couple of our trained snake experts - whom work with snake whisperer Rom Whittaker – got hooked onto some snake tracks and showed no signs of complacency. Suddenly the smaller guy picked out a saw scaled viper from underneath the path. So small, yet so venomous. I was surprised by how close the photographers got up to this shy animal. After viper victor's photo shoot, he was placed back in his natural habitat so he couldn't be harmed by any locals (no animals were hurt during the making of this blog). We hiked back to the croc bank after finding a rat snake and another saw-scaled viper later on.

I carried on with my data collection on juvenile crocodiles, fed the second largest species of tortoise in the world and visited the iguanas during lunch time. These creatures are fed behind closed doors in captivity and aren't shown to the public so I feel very grateful to interact with these beautiful animals. Our female iguana, Monty, is pregnant therefore we might see more roaming around very soon.

My boss, Nikhil Whittaker, has recently given me some great images of snakes to make drawings of which is exciting. Having never sold a painting or drawing makes this experience very surreal. Additionally, I've started creating some T-shirt designs and I'm currently drawing up an arrow in the shape of a crocodile mouth for the park. It's nice to know that they're open to other ideas as well. All in all, I'm fairly busy and having an enjoyable time!

Till then

Freddie KP

Snakes, turtles and more snakes (February)

Before this weekend I'd been working solid for a couple of weeks as there's been a lot going on. In fact, the BBC were here to do some filming for their website. They were a funny group of Indians and I enjoyed their company.

On Friday, One of the volunteers invited me out to the snake park in Chennai. I heard positive things about this place so I tagged along. After breakfast, we caught a couple of buses and walked a few hundred metres to reach the park. The first things we saw inside were lizards and geckos, which reminded of my bathroom at Crocbank. As we wandered around we learnt some new facts about snakes, including the Tamil word for anaconda being 'elephant killer'. It was especially interesting to find out that a decrease in snake populations will lead to rapid reductions in harvests because of intensified rat populations. Inside the main building were life size models of adult cobras and exciting documentaries on snakes from Rom Whitaker. We had lunch outside (I may have had an ice cream), then went into the animal park nearby. This was a lovely area to just walk around and enjoy some fresh air. Not to mention the perfect place to practise some animal impressions.

I started Saturday morning by joining in with snake cleaning responsibilities. Don't worry, these ones weren't venomous! We cleaned out the boxes and even got to hold the pretty cool looking South American milk snake. Before lunch we helped out with iguana feeding and I departed for the

city again. This time it was for a 5 kilometre fun run that creates awareness for Olive Ridley sea turtles. I got to see them in Sri Lanka, however these animals really struggle to survive on the Tamil Nadu coastline due to many avoidable issues. I caught the first bus on my journey but then had to sprint to catch the next one! Finally I arrived at Queen Mary's college to collect my bib number and was very lucky to get offered some accommodation from the staff.

We woke up at 3 in the morning so that we could start preparing for the big occasion. I don't think I'd seen that many water bottles in my life; it was a great insight into the effort it takes to produce events for charity. The Tunisian man who organised this fun run told me it was totally non-profit and purely to spread awareness. At 6AM the run began, some Indian teenagers sprinted ahead so they could stay warm with the light breeze in the air. Keeping a steady pace I eventually overtook them at the halfway point where I stepped it up a gear. I managed to dodge a stray cow and finished with a time of 29 minutes. A free breakfast and gold medal was much appreciated for the pain I suffered in my legs as it's been a while since my last race. Taking the opportunity to wonder on Marina beach, I stumbled upon a cricket match. The locals were so friendly that I was put straight into bat subsequently allowing a few selfies. I smashed a couple of shots onto the offside to score some runs until one was caught in the deep. I've finally played cricket in India – a dream come true.

Thankfully, I was allowed some time to rest at Crocbank. Later, Toby, Birgit and I fed the Aldabra tortoises some papaya on sticks. That's always good fun and Toby's keen to do it every day. Shortly afterwards, there was an interactive talk on Jaws III (the biggest captive reptile in India at 16 feet). Because it was so crowded, we went behind the enclosure with our ID cards to get a better glimpse. There wasn't much feeding this time, instead we got to see a family of wild monkeys that got close up to us.

Going for a swim in the ocean was a great way to end this weekend. It feels even better that I've finished my latest coloured drawing of a saw scaled viper.

'til then

Freddie KP.

Agumbe Rainforest Research Station

A rainforest in India! Who knew?!

My geography teacher always told our class that if we had a re-union in twenty years' time and none of us had been to a rainforest, then we would get a kicking. I always imagined that I'd end up travelling to the dense jungles of Congo or the never-ending Amazon rainforest but it turns out there was one right on our doorstep.

Crocbank helped us with our journey to the Western Ghats which included 7 hours on a train and 8 hours on a brilliant night-bus (we literally had a double bed, as in a flat one). We arrived in Agumbe where it was a misty morning with a line of tuk tuks waiting for us. Riding a Rickshaw into the rainforest was definitely memorable and we were shown the cottage we'd be sleeping in at the research station. Later that evening, Toby and I headed to the village with the other guys for a night walk. Tarantulas, scorpions and millipedes were pointed out to us in pitch black.

On Thursday afternoon we following some interns at the camp on a trek through the jungle. After finding skinks and vine snakes, the team climbed down a series of steps and stumbled upon the cliff edge of a giant waterfall out of the bushes. To jump down this vast drop would be foolish. Not just because of how high it was but you'd be missing out on a gorgeous view of the rainforest. "On a clear day you can see the trees extend all the way to the ocean" our guide whispered. Overwhelmed would be an understatement of how good it felt to be up there. When we explored in

further there were tiny amphibians nicknamed the dancing frogs which entertained us for a while. Hiking through the forest paths felt better than any national park I've been to and the view at the end justified that well.

The next day, Toby and I heard of a place called Yogi Gundi falls. We were pointed in the right direction with a hand drawn map and off we set. This was a tougher hike but still enjoyable as the final path had steps descending into the valley of the rainforest. Though the waterfall wasn't much at this time of year, the large boulders we jumped to and from provided a bit of an adventure.

We'd been living in a rainforest for a few days, although it wasn't until my final morning that I got to see flying lizards (Draco's). A volunteer asked us to look for them on the trees whilst he fixed GoPro cameras to match different angles. Watching other volunteers collect research on endangered species gave a great perspective on our work back at croc bank. Plus, witnessing lizards that zip from tree to tree is an awesome experience. Earlier that morning we'd seen a giant squirrel in the trees from our cottage!

For our final day we travelled via a couple of buses to a temple with a river running past it. Locals fed the large fish that swim close to the steps as they've apparently done so for generations. Ironically, it started raining before we got back to Agumbe research station. Just as we turned a corner the staff were standing over a large snake. An adult king cobra to be precise. Sadly, it was roadkill and judging from the sheer size it was pretty easy to understand why. Agumbe is known as the capital of cobras. The conservation work being done here for their survival is great to see.

Ghorepani Poon Hill trek:

Ranked in the top 10 treks in Nepal, I knew I was in for a treat. I've really enjoyed hiking in Wales and recently India, although this expedition probably tops it all. An amazing journey packed with fantastic views every day, vibrant villages and a constantly changing landscape. The only negative was that I had to eventually leave the Annapurna's. At least I can say that Ghorapani is now my second home!

It all started with an epic taxi ride up the hill side. Travelling in the misty rain made the turns in the road extra fun I thought. I also like the way Nepalese taxis are small white vehicles that look capable of doing the Italian job. Once we reached Nayapul we walked along a bridge wrapped in prayer flags and set off into the Annapurna conservation area. The relaxing morning hike allowed us to take in the natural beauty. My guide taught me about the history of this conservation site whilst standing in front of a great waterfall. After lunch the real challenge began as this was the steepest part of the expedition. We climbed up in the pouring rain. Occasionally we would stop to see how far we'd come, as well as rap our rucksacks in plastic. I rewarded myself with a nice hot chocolate when we finally reached Ulleri. An adventurous start to day 1 of the trek after getting an 8 hour bus ride to Pokhara the previous day.

The mist had cleared the following morning so we could see an impressive mountain to the south. To the north it was possible to see Annapurna one poking out of the hillside. The path was less steep yet this time the sun was out. As we made our way down past more waterfalls we stumbled across horses and donkeys skipping along. I almost got shoved over by the huge rice bags they carried. Nevertheless, day 2 was a really enjoyable hike with plenty of restaurants and markets along the way. My guide complemented me with "You very quick walker so today is only four hours not six". Ghorapani is a very welcoming place surrounded by mountains in every direction. Even my bathroom window had a picturesque view. The village is mixed with tourists and locals so I wandered around until ending up in a basketball match, then a futsal match. By night the same park was full of people for the Nepalese New year concert where a small American band were playing songs like "what do I do about you" and "lucky". A complete surprise and a crazy experience!

On the third morning of our trek and day 2 of the year 2072 we had a very early morning so we could climb Poon Hill. I wrapped up very warm, although I felt the heat a little as we raced up to the top to catch sunrise. It took under an hour to reach the summit and I could

have spent hours there. A spectacular panoramic view of some pretty cool mountain ranges. Fortunately my guide was there to name each one for me. Being up there is something I'll never forget because they feel so close to you! Honestly, the pictures don't give it enough justice. My knees were exhausted from the climb down so I dived into a bowl of porridge at breakfast, packed up and endured another steep climb up through more jungles. At the first hilltop the Poon Hill summit is visible with even more dark mountains in the distance. We walked on and on until I was pointed out to the village we climbed to on the first day. Straight afterwards, we spiralled down the hillside into a valley before climbing up the other side. Bumping into the same travellers and joking about the tough climb made it all a lot of fun. It poured down as we reached the top so much that the path almost became a river. Luckily we had arrived at Tandipani so we found a couple of small rooms in a tea house. That evening I could definitely feel the weight in my legs whilst lying in bed. Totally worth it though.

After breakfast I collected my dry clothes, then wandered out to see the stunning view of Fishtail Mountain. I couldn't believe how it only took me a few steps to find this incredible view! I took a lot of photos at this point and many more during our hike that day as it was a much shorter distance, full of forests and open areas. We were at Ghandruk before lunch but all for good reason. This was the last highpoint of the trek where I could see a glacier next to Annapurna South. Therefore it was hard not to kick back and enjoy the landscape. Not too far from the viewpoint was a basketball court so we joined in with the kids but decided to visit a small museum when the score line was starting to get ridiculous.

On the final morning I took in one last view of the mountains at the helicopter pad (yes, a proper helicopter pad). Then "jam jam", which I think is how you pronounce the Nepalese phrase for 'let's go'. Anyway the hike was all downhill with some awesome sights, although the weather didn't stop throwing up surprises. Whilst it was sunny I managed to spot an eagle and even more horses in the forests. When it started raining we could hear the river even more. I think towards the end of the trek I saw the highest waterfall during the week as well as a set of rapids in the river. There was a local at the last Nayapul checkpoint wearing an Arsenal top so after chatting to him I realised that Kathmandu sells pretty much anything. On the taxi journey back to Pokhara my guide fell asleep in the back after experiencing a week of madness. It's been an incredible adventure and I'm glad to have shared it with him. Everyone should visit Poon Hill!

Back from Nepal

After the recent earthquake in Nepal, I've flown back to the UK to be with my family and friends. The Gorkha earthquake was a very terrifying experience. One that I hope you never have to experience, although it has given me a different perspective so I wish to help out as much as possible. I want to help out with Future Sense and fundraise to help the partnership schools they have out there. Donating money towards charities such as Future Sense will go a long way in providing food, water and tents to people who are still struggling. This disaster may disappear from the news very soon but the aid will have to go on for months and months. Any help is appreciated.

Sachita and the Nepal team are working hard to do what they can for their beautiful country which shows how amazing they are. It's a shame I could only spend a week with them as they are fun and welcoming personalities. Plus, the family I stayed with made me feel very much at home. I'll miss them a lot!

Teaching in Nepal was fantastic because the kids had such a positive attitude to learning. There's a great view of the Himalayas from the school on a calm day so no wonder they enjoy going there 6 times a week. You get to see a lot of smiles and laughter after lessons when they take part in sports sessions as well. I remember when they played this one game where one kid would be blindfolded, spun around, then have to walk in a straight line so they could hit a bucket with a stick. I hear that all the children are OK after last week's event but I'm sure they'll get through it. If anyone can grow stronger after this, it's the Nepalese.

My greatest hope is that I can get back out there soon to finish my project.