

## My Indian adventure

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Many people say that life begins at the end of your comfort zone. For me, travelling 4,500 miles to a whole new culture and environment was definitely out of my comfort zone. After recently completing a year abroad in Germany, the prospect of sitting at home waiting for university to restart after a whirlwind busy year was something I was desperate to avoid. It was at this point that I decided that I would try and put my summer to good use and do some volunteering. Although I have only ever volunteered at Lourdes before, I found the trip to be one of the best weeks of my life and the memories from the trip have stayed with me ever since. In my search for volunteering options, I came across the Sylvia Wright Trust and the Rangammal School. After growing up in Leeds, I had through both my parish and school heard before of the work of Sylvia Wright and her inspiring mission to help others.

After many last minute organisations, I set off on Tuesday 26th July to Manchester airport completely oblivious of what to expect but excited for what lay ahead. At Manchester airport, I met Jessica Lofthouse, a trained speech therapist, and after travelling to Chennai we met with Frankie Wilkinson, our other travel companion. The three of us were met by the friendly Mr Jayraj at Chennai airport and within minutes we were on our way to the school. For someone who had not visited India before, I spent the 4 hour journey to the school taking in the sights, sounds and smells in all their glory. Nevertheless, it took us approximately 5 minutes to realise that the car horn is more important than the brakes in India!

Our arrival at the school was everything we were told it would be. Within seconds we were surrounded by children, beaming with smiles and wanting to welcome us to the school. As I had no experience with sign language or Tamil, I was undoubtedly apprehensive about communicating with the children and what use I would be. Nevertheless, this was a wasted fear as the children were teaching me sign language within minutes and by the next morning I knew my alphabet!

The three of us spent the first few days adjusting to life at the school. In doing so, we observed the lessons, the daily life at the school, and were even able to visit the hospital established by Madam Sylvia. Although Madam was away on vacation for our stay at the school, many of the teachers and students expressed how they missed their Madam and were looking forward to her return which clearly shows how much of an important presence she has at the school.

After settling in, Jessica started her work assessing the speech of the children through individual evaluations with the help of some of the teachers. With Jessica at work, Frankie and I had the pleasure of going to the different classrooms and playing with the children. Following a few trips to hobbycraft before leaving England, we had an abundance of craft supplies and were able to visit the different classes and let the fun begin. From hand prints to butterflies to cards for visiting parents, Frankie and I alone had a great time.. and the children seemed to enjoy it greatly. Alongside our crafts, we played with bubbles, skipping ropes and even learnt some traditional Indian playground games. Amongst the younger children, hide and seek was always a hit, despite the blatant cheating of some!

On one of the Sundays, we were lucky enough to watch the older boys playing cricket and were impressed by the talent of all them. Although we had a go ourselves at both the bowling and batting, we unfortunately did not make the team. This same weekend we visited the local town, Tiruvannamalai, where we saw both the Temple and the Ashram and really enjoyed taking in the sites.

One of my most memorable moments of the trip has to be a school trip to the Golden Temple and Zoo in Vellore. After being informed of the school trip only minutes before, the three of us were just

as excited as the children for it. Throughout the trip the children were so well behaved and were even gifted a large bag of free toys by a market stall owner, which they were so thrilled about. On the way home, we had an impromptu dance show on our bus, where the children truly put the three of us volunteers to shame with their amazing dance moves. The laughing and smiling of the children was infectious and really made the journey.

Throughout my whole stay at the school, I was amazed by the happiness of the school children, something I doubt is the same at home. Every child seemed so grateful and happy to be at the school and I think this is a credit to the good work done at the school. The teachers and staff were so welcoming with many of them saying 'please see me as your sister, if you ever need anything please let me know'.

I personally feel as if the experience has been unforgettable and taught me many things, about life and myself. I am certain that I have gained more out of this experience than the school was able to gain from me. The children have reaffirmed my belief that it is the small things in life that matter. One of the gifts that I was sent along with was a batch of pens. I witnessed the children receiving a pen each and they were so thankful and excited which really touched me.

I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to visit the school and India. I am certain that I will continue to look back at the hundreds of photos and reflect on the experience with sheer joy. For those considering visiting the school, I would say go ahead. Before visiting, I was advised to take India for India and refrain from comparing it with home or the western world. This I believe was great advice and what all should do. Don't worry about the small things such as bucket showers or spicy food for breakfast, you will quickly adjust and it will become normality. Embrace the culture, the environment and the attitudes to life. There are so many positives of volunteering, many of which will stay with you for life. So if you are questioning volunteering, I would say why not?

I can confirm that life does begin at the end of your comfort zone and it is an inspiring and exciting life that lies ahead. I would like to thank all who helped both organise my visit to the Rangammal School and those who made my experience at the school so rewarding.