

Volunteering in Nepal and Sri Lanka

Anne-Marie Martin looks back on an exciting trip with Year 12 students sharing their experience with young deaf people in these countries

Having already built links with schools for the deaf in Norway and Germany, three years ago we decided to take Year 12 students overseas to work alongside young deaf people in Asia.

Our motivation was twofold; firstly for our students to understand the difference between our education system and the system that existed in Asia and secondly to enjoy spending some time with young deaf people in other countries and to learn a little of a different culture.

We went with a large group, firstly on a three-week volunteering project to Nepal and more recently for two weeks to Sri Lanka during their summer holiday.

In bleak surroundings in a state school for the Deaf in Kathmandu, we plastered and painted a boys' dormitory to try and improve the conditions in which they lived. The crumbling walls made it a thankless task but the Nepalese children who slept there were grateful for our work and pleased with the improvements we had made. To relax, our students spent their time with the deaf students in the school and played football matches on rough uneven ground, an activity enjoyed by all.

In Pokhara we spent time with Nepalese teachers and students in a couple of different schools exchanging experiences, teaching techniques and forming new friendships. Dignitaries of the Nepalese education world came to meet us, and we were warmly welcomed. Whilst decorating our hands with henna, the teachers and children chatted with our students, amazed that despite



being deaf, they could all speak as well as using sign language to communicate easily and fluently with the Nepalese children.

Between our time in the different schools, we trekked for six days in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains where we experienced a host of new challenges – leeches, a hard climb, monsoon rains, electricity cuts and lack of Wi-Fi! Entering rising cloud was like walking into an air-conditioned room and gave welcome relief from the humidity we were otherwise experiencing.

The Sherpas we had employed were fantastic and looked after us well. Other than carrying our bags, they waited patiently with those of us who struggled, entertained us with their music and song and happily played volley ball with us at the top of the mountain.

Two years on, Nepal is still struggling from the impact of the earthquake which struck in 2015. Many of its historic buildings were destroyed and the infrastructure is a long way off being restored. The people were so positive, kind and hospitable in such difficult circumstances and appreciative of the gifts we brought; it was very humbling.

Our experience in Sri Lanka was very different from that of Nepal. We were based in a hostel in the outskirts of Colombo and did a mixture of work including: refurbishing the outside of a building to make it suitable for





selling baked goods to the passing public, clearing a small beach of plastic rubbish brought in by the tide and spending a day cleaning out turtle tanks. A highlight of this trip was releasing the two-day old hatchlings into the sea at sunset. In contrast to Nepal, this school had received much funding from various charities, so the buildings were well kept, and the school was better resourced. It was rare to see deaf children using audiological equipment in either country despite the Sri Lankan school having designated speech and language therapy and audiology departments.



Following the observation of a lesson, it was hugely rewarding to witness our students sharing their experiences of learning in a passionate and informative way with the Sri Lankan staff who were keen to implement some of the ideas.

Sri Lanka is a beautiful country of temples, mountains and beaches with a greater western influence than Nepal. The trips to these countries were very different but equally inspiring, developing their self-confidence, resilience and appreciation of the opportunities open to them. On returning to the UK, every student reflected positively on their experience, wishing to share their deeper

understanding of other deaf communities with their peers, and many expressed a desire to do further volunteering in the future.



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The cover features a main photograph of a young child being examined by a professional while a woman looks on. Below this are two smaller images: one showing people at a computer workstation and another showing various hearing aids and headphones.