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## **Volunteer Report - Ellie Coupe**

**Project: Grace House Community Centre, Siem Reap Dates: 07/05/18 - 22/06/18**

### **People and Places Feedback**

Kate and the team at People and Places were very helpful, accommodating and efficient in organising my time volunteering. I got in touch hoping to get away as soon as possible with short notice and they were able to make it work for me whilst managing my expectations. I appreciated Kate advising me on the country that might be best suited to me and she put me in touch with others whilst she was away so that the process could be sped up. I liked the preparation documents, which gave you info on the basics, and the opportunity to speak to previous volunteers. The info pack on Grace House, however, may be a bit out of date but I understand the difficulties of keeping up with a Cambodian NGO! I don't have any criticism at all really. Perhaps more explanation about the relationship between People and Places, Concert and Grace House. There is only so much you can do to prepare someone to live in Cambodia for two months.

Note: we now have an up-to-date pack from Grace House. We've added information for future volunteers about our working model and the relationship between 'people and places' as the facilitator for placements with our local partners and their projects.

### **Concert and Grace House Feedback**

Michael and Sophea provided good support from start to finish. When I arrived late on Friday night to Victory Guesthouse I was handed the phone with Michael on the other end inviting me to dinner and checking I was okay. The orientation of Siem Reap the next day with Sophea was useful and provided some time to just take everything in. She got us sim cards, showed us where to eat and shop, and most importantly gave us our bikes! The weekly meet up at the Ivy restaurant is a great occurrence, giving you time with Michael, his family, Sary, Sophea and whoever else turns up. They were always on hand to help out and Michael came to visit Grace House a few times. I also found the child protection workshop invaluable and fascinating - great place to share knowledge. The only thing I would feedback to Concert is that when Sophea came to visit in the mornings it was often too late to chat to her - all the other volunteers had left for the day and we were getting up to go, which saw us leaving her alone awkwardly. I would suggest she doesn't need to come more than once a week unless there are issues.

Note – agreed. We've shared this with Michael at ConCERT

Grace House is such an amazing place. Deb and Fiona provided fab additional support for me day to day. Whenever we were ill or had issues they would help us out. Fiona was a great lunchtime companion and I have so much respect for her - a cross between a good friend and a mum! It's a really well run NGO with quite a good structure to it, which seems rare listening to volunteers [with other organisations].

There's organised weekly meetings, a proper curriculum and a lovely family feel. Deb gave us a proper induction and met with us a couple of times to check up on us. I felt I could bring up concerning issues with her in confidence and that they would be acted on correctly.

### **My Volunteering Experience**

It was without doubt the best thing I have ever done! Every element be it friends, children, teachers,  
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support, accommodation, time off etc all made it such a great time.

Firstly, staying in Victory Guesthouse was such a joyous experience. If you want to feel like part of the family you must stay here! They treated us so well, inviting us on trips and taking us to Angkor Wat, providing snacks for free and even dancing with us in the evenings. I have to say that the room was basic but after a few nights it felt like home (especially with added A/C for \$4 a night). It was also packed with other volunteers of my age who are now my friends for life and provided me with great company all day everyday. We would eat together every evening after school in the guesthouse or in town and party together every weekend. Myself and a good friend I made took multiple trips together on the weekends or public holidays (there are lots). Other weekends we would stay at the pool opposite at Eureka villas, where you can spend \$4 for a bed and towel.

My biggest challenge was definitely the heat. May is the hottest month in Cambodia and most days friend and I often got tuktuks using the Passapp, which made it very cheap (about \$2 per trip) and a lot quicker. The school has fans in the classrooms but they don't make it much cooler. Some days I found it difficult to concentrate from the heat. I was very happy when the rain came in June, although it was still boiling.

As Grace House is very well organised there wasn't much that needed doing in terms of adding to resources. The staff room has loads of books, arts materials, worksheets and previous volunteer lesson plans. There is a computer in the staff room that you can use to find worksheets but you have to make copies in town not at the school - they don't allow you as it's too expensive. There is one in town they can direct you to where you get 40 copies for \$1.

Being in the Chicks and Bees class I didn't feel the need to lesson plan much because they are so little so often it naturally fell into playing educational games. However, I do think volunteers should definitely at least have a proper think each weekend what they want to do in that week. The teachers do rely on you to come up with ideas especially in art and games times. I ended up bringing my iPad to school sometimes with fun youtube videos that taught vocabulary and I made a few little power points to act as flashcards.

**Note: working with volunteers such as Ellie helps to build the local teachers' confidence in their own ideas**

The greatest moment of pride I felt was when my class performed at circle time (assembly). We had practiced all week and it was so lovely to see them sing with confidence and to see my teacher Sreykun so happy. I absolutely loved maths lessons with my Chicks class. They were intelligent and so excited to learn, which made my heart melt. It was refreshing to meet children who enjoyed learning and rarely cried or moaned at all.

Finally, I have so much praise for the teachers and staff. I made such good friends with all the teachers and miss them so much. They are great teachers and I loved being able to support them in anyway. The main way I feel I gave back was to empower Sreykun and build her confidence in her English skills. She really knew the kids well and had so much love and encouragement to give.

### **Advice**

There's not much that can prepare you for Siem Reap and Grace House if it's your first time. I would advise to just go with an open mind and heart. The people are so friendly and I felt safe the entire time. I was worried that I wouldn't find friends or enjoy my project, but I ended up leaving a family behind at the school and guesthouse. You realise after hanging out with the Khmer people you have a lot more similarities than differences even if you can't speak their language. Definitely make an effort to spend time with the local teachers and say yes to any opportunity offered including the strange food. Learn about their language and culture. I only regret that I didn't meet more Khmer people!

Also, don't worry too much about what you are giving back. I felt I couldn't give much in terms of practical support, but actually my friend and I brought so much energy and friendship to the teachers. I think they enjoyed having us around. I hope to be able to go back some day soon!



Lunchtimes



Grace House



Victory Guesthouse family





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Thank you.