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Volunteer Placement Report Ellie Cartwright

in the Gambia at Mary's Little Lambs and Kololi (11th-25th January 2020)



Pre-Departure Preparation

It was helpful to read previous reports written by volunteers which gave me a better understanding of what my own placement might look like. I also had a look online so that I had a bit of background knowledge on the Gambia, such as the history and politics of the Gambia, current attitudes towards women/tourism etc which was useful and interesting. I had the luxury of going to the Gambia with my Nana who has volunteered through people and places on a number of occasions so her own experience and insight was particularly helpful and helped massively before my departure.

Orientation and Preparation at the start of the Placement

We arrived into the Gambia during the middle of the night and were collected from the airport by Adama (thank you!) so we spent most of our first day (Sunday) resting. Adama and Lisong came to visit us at our apartment in the afternoon and explained the itinerary for our first day. On the Monday morning, Lisong came to collect us and walked us to MLL, so that we were aware of the route from our apartment to the school. The journey took approximately 10 minutes but could be done even quicker. Kololi's Nursery was also en route to MLL and we were introduced to the head teacher as we passed. Our first day did not involve any teaching and was used as an introduction for us to meet the children and teachers and for Lisong to show us around the school. We also

1 Naboth's Nursery, Canterbury Road, Faversham, Kent ME13 8AX
tel +44 (0) 8700 460 479 | email info@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk

ascertained our class schedule with Abdourahman so that we were prepared for the week ahead. As I am not a fully Qualified Teacher, it was suggested that I help in the nursery primarily and then would observe other classes more closely to see where I thought I could be of help or assistance. We discussed that I could teach the oldest class I.T and also assist with P.E. My timetable was therefore slightly more flexible and was subject to change. Lisong then walked us to a large supermarket after our morning introduction so that we could stock up on food and water for our apartment.

I should also note that my suitcase did not arrive for a few days and so Adama spent a lot of his time liaising with the airport regarding its whereabouts and updates on when we would receive it. The first few days were therefore a bit chaotic for him/us and eventually we both went to the airport together to pick it up!

Your experience and work –

Although it was assumed that I would spend most of my time in the Nursery at MLL, in reality I spent much more time in the school with the slightly older children – and I was really happy with this. I felt this suited me better as I was able to make more of a long-lasting impact on the children and school by helping them learn new skills such as I.T and allowing them to be more creative through subjects like Art. I enjoyed these two subjects in particular as I was able to lead the teaching rather than just assisting in the classroom and I enjoyed being able to deliver a lesson myself, which is something I did not know if I would be fully comfortable with at first. It was great to see the children so pleased with their final pieces of work and explore different ways of using art that goes beyond drawing and colouring.



It was also encouraging to see the children so engaged with the I.T class and they picked up on things really fast! It was great to see them helping one another and be proud of what they had learnt in such a short space of time.

Music and P.E were also two other lessons that I enjoyed helping with and would have liked to have spent more time doing this. I introduced one new game in P.E. to the teachers/children and the feedback for this was very positive. I would have really liked to have shown them some other games which they could then have then used again in future P.E classes. I think introducing games (which involves physical exercise) is a really fun way to warm up the body for sports and is more engaging for the children.

Any other time was spent assisting in the nursery or the classrooms, helping with marking, spelling, pronunciation etc. I was glad to be of help here and provide extra support but I did not feel I made as much of an impact by doing this.

I only spent one full day at Kololi school. I spent the afternoon teaching the children Art and would have liked to have explored this with some of the other classes, however my time was very limited. I think spending an extra afternoon or so at Kololi school would have been more effective as opposed to – for example, assisting in the nursery.

What did we do well and what could we do better?

The information provided was extremely comprehensive and thorough. I was kept well informed before my placement began and I felt I could ask any questions if necessary. It would have been reassuring to receive a little bit more contact throughout our trip, however this was not necessary and just something that would have made us feel more connected with yourselves!

Your recommendations for the input of future volunteers – a particular area of your work which could be continued by others and how would you suggest this could be done?

I am aware that most of the volunteers who work with People and Places are generally older than myself with much more experience and knowledge of teaching, education, social care etc. Whilst I naturally did not feel as confident as a fully qualified teacher would, I think volunteers can still bring other important tools to the school, who may not be as qualified, for example leading lessons such as I.T. This was something I felt much better with given that younger people are much more familiar and comfortable with computer systems. I think it would be particularly useful to continue teaching I.T. to the students given how essential these skills are, particularly for employment.

Overall experience and highlights

My overall experience was incredible and I loved every second of it. The highlight for me was getting the opportunity to meet and connect with new inspiring people (particularly Lisong, Adama, Abdourahman, Elsie and Jo) who I learnt a great deal from and enjoyed sharing many stories, insights and hopes for the future with. It was amazing to see all the hard work that the teachers put into MLL's daily – they are incredibly passionate about the wellbeing and education of the children and there is a very positive and uplifting energy which I felt there. A volunteering placement should not only be about the time you spend in the classroom, but also the ideas and conversations that are exchanged which help shape ways of thinking about life, learning and love. It was very obvious to me that there was a real hunger to learn and expand amongst both teachers and students and to achieve the very best school possible.

My accommodation and leisure time We stayed in a self-catered apartment with a basic kitchenette and a living room. The staff at the apartment complex were incredibly helpful, friendly and made us feel very welcome. They went above and beyond to make sure our needs were met and treated us with so much kindness (thank you!) It would have been nicer if we had our own private outdoor area as many of the other rooms had (for example a balcony or veranda) so that we could spend more time outside (with a glass of wine and a book?). We were luckily able to use the seats outside of the building's front entrance although this was shared with other guests who were regularly in and out. It was a very short and cheap taxi ride (about 3 minutes) to the beach and to a strip of restaurants which we made full use of. I spent a couple of afternoons down by the beach reading which was lovely. Although we had the opportunity to cook for ourselves, we predominantly ate out.

Adama also organized a perfect weekend for us, which included our own personal guide for the day and taxi. They were excellent – had lots of information to share with us about the sights we saw and really just wanted us to have the most enjoyable experience possible! We visited a crocodile park, went on a beautiful river boat, visited an abattoir and lots of fun and lively markets, including the fishing market. We were able to tailor the weekend to suit our own personal preferences and interests. It was great to fit so much into one weekend and I felt like we really made the most of my two weeks there thanks to the help of Adama and his team.

Would I recommend volunteering As should be obvious from my report, I had a very special two weeks in the Gambia and would absolutely recommend other volunteers to go here if possible. The opportunity to volunteer is a very unique experience and I would always encourage others to take this up if this is something they feel particularly passionate about and that they think they can contribute towards. Volunteering is not for everyone and I think attitude is key. In my opinion, to be a volunteer you must be open-minded and. Things do not always go to plan and life in a foreign country may throw a plethora of obstacles at you – culturally, environmentally, emotionally etc. It is then vital that you are able to tackle any issues with a relaxed and calm response. Perspective is key and if you are someone who welcomes new challenges and the opportunity to step outside the realms of comfortability, then volunteering is something you should definitely consider pursuing.

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Thank you.