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Volunteer placement report Treak Cambodia

Volunteers: Brinje Haugli and Kristen Vestre

Placement: Treak Community Centre, Cambodia, working as assistants for the teachers mainly focusing on science and physical education

Dates: March 14th – April 8th 2022



Our motivation:

We were planning to travel for a few months and wanted to stay at one place for a longer time so we could truly experience the culture. We thought volunteering was the perfect way to do so, as we hopefully could help others as well!

Pre-placement preparation:

We received a lot of useful documents, for example other volunteer reports, and Dianne (*people and places* Placement Director) also helped us prepare what we needed to enter Cambodia. We also received contact information from other volunteers we could ask for help and advice.

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Orientation and preparation at the start of the placement:

We were picked up at the airport and greeted at the guest house by Sophea once we arrived. She took us on a guided tour through Siem Reap the same day we arrived. The next day we went to the school and went on a tour around the school to learn about the different rooms and rules. After the tour we were put in each of our classrooms and had the chance to introduce ourselves to the younger students.



Our experience and work:

After the first day we were placed with the older students and ended up having them for the rest of our four weeks volunteering. We assisted the teachers as well as we could with the language barrier, and came up with ideas on what to do to make the education on different subjects more interesting. We incorporated a lot of the typical ways we were taught growing up that we thought might be useful. For example splitting into groups to learn about different subjects and then presenting it to the rest of the class, and also roleplay so everybody had to speak English.

Dara (head-teacher at Treak Community Centre) also asked us to help him come up with easier ways to explain and teach his science classes. The subjects were mostly new to him, so we think he wanted some good resources to understand it for himself first. This is something future volunteers can help him with, as he found it of great use. We also think this is a great task for online volunteers!

(note from people and places: Science is a new subject for Treak. Simple Science is taught in Cambodian schools but only straight from a textbook, with no practical activities at all. Dara is keen for his students to learn this subject in an interactive and interesting way – but he never experienced this himself as a pupil – so he is eager for any suggestions volunteers can give him)



We also tried to play with the children during break time. This was quite hard because we were in Cambodia during the hottest time of the year, and we were not used to the heat. We at least encouraged them to play different games, which seemed to work since some students arrived one hour before their classes just to play. (Jumping rope is a nice way to get more of the girls to play as well.)

Success, disappointments, challenges:

successes:

We have many small success stories of individuals that finally understand a sentence or are able to pronounce a word correctly.

In one class - a library session- we read a difficult children's book. One of the older students was allowed to try to translate to the other children, and some of them were trying their best to help her. Their teacher corrected the translation and explained the parts the student could not manage on her own. After class, the student came up to me and was overfilled with joy. She finally understood the book, and was so pleased with herself for daring to talk in front of the other students.

The activities we did with the children during break time was another success. After a while the students started playing more independently, and we no longer had to participate as much. The school yard became more crowded each day passing by.

disappointments:

Inefficient use of time. Because of the Covid restrictions we were only tutoring the children for 4 hours per day, while we stayed at the school for 8 hours. Although we understand the restrictions, it was hard to justify the long breaks when the school was empty of children a lot of the time.

(note from people and places: Brinje and Kristen were the first volunteers at Treak following two years of closures due to the pandemic. Restrictions were not yet fully lifted so the number of children at school at any one time was still limited for health and safety reasons)

The children's access to equipment during break time. Although their school yard is not the largest, the school does have equipment like footballs, badminton etc., to activate the children. But because of the shortage of equipment either a teacher or a volunteer must supervise the playing. One suggestion we have to how the children can take care of the equipment themselves, is to have class equipment. The students are then responsible for taking their equipment back to their class after break time is over.

Challenges:

Corona created a huge gap between the students' knowledge of English. Therefore, a classroom was filled with children with very different English skills and although the teachers were doing their best, it was hard to adapt to the different students. So, a lot of the time a larger amount of the students didn't understand the lessons.

(note from people and places: The pandemic created a gap of nearly two years in the students' education. Dara and the other teachers did a fantastic job of creating online learning opportunities and providing learning materials – however inevitably some students were not able to take advantage of these opportunities. At the time of Brinje and Kristen's placement students were only just getting used to being back at school. As in classrooms all round the world, the gap between those who had been able to continue studying and those who had had a two year break from education was noticeable)

When we were asked to help making content for the class, or to help Dara with science, it was challenging to understand what the children knew from before. We had to compare with our first years of school to adapt the class, although the students were much older. What we consider as basic knowledge that you learn from your parents or in everyday life, was unknown to some of them. Therefore, we had to find ways to explain the basics in a fun way for older children. This got easier with time as we got to know the students, and we felt more useful in the classes at the end of our stay.

Highlights:

Seeing how eager the teachers were to teach the students, and how open they were to new ideas and solutions. It was also wonderful to see the joy students felt because they finally were back at school after a long time with strict Covid restrictions.

Everybody at Treak was so willing to show us new experiences; we got to go to a Cambodian wedding, a traditional house opening and a bike tour with the teachers. They gave us advice and tips on how to spend our leisure time, and we had a lot more “authentic” experiences than during the rest of our trip. (Brinje and Kristen followed up their volunteering with another two months travelling in Asia)

We also must mention our last day of volunteering, which we will certainly remember fondly! It was the last day of school before Khmer New Year, and the teachers prepared a wonderful day. We had a big stage and every class had prepared an entertainment number. Afterwards there were games and challenges, and you could just see how happy everybody was, they came all dressed up and eager to participate! It was the perfect end to our volunteer placement and we got to say goodbye to everyone.



Leisure time:

We explored Siem Reap, learned Kun Khmer (Khmer fighting technique), visited Bar Street, and of course explored Angkor. Angkor was more interesting and impressive than we could ever imagine, and if we were staying for a longer time we might have spent more than a weekend there. If you use a bike to get to the school we absolutely recommend exploring Angkor by bike. You can do it on your own time and genuinely enjoy the scenery.

We were also lucky enough to be there at the same time as three other volunteers which we spent a lot of time with!

Our accommodation:

Our accommodation was wonderful. We stayed at Victory Guest House, which had everything we needed and was far better than our usual standard while traveling. It had a nice pool and the owners always greeted us with big smiles and advice on whatever we needed.

Advice for future volunteers:

people and places did answer and provide us with all the information we needed and more before we left - the information given is suitable and matches the placement. When we arrived, Treak Community Centre made us a part of their community and was helpful and open to any concerns or requests we had. But if there are any games or things you want to buy for the school, we recommend doing this before your trip (at least if you have something specific in mind). We were not impressed by the selection the stores in Siem Reap had to offer.

(note from *people and places*: we advise volunteers to buy resources locally if possible – to benefit the local economy and save precious space in the suitcase! But if you know you want to buy something specific it would be worth checking with Dara whether or not it is available in Siem Reap before departure)

We would recommend volunteering to other people. Although some things disappointed us, it is easy to see that Treak Community Centre is doing something nice for the children of the village. And even the students who do not understand much of the class, have a safe place to spend parts of their day and challenge themselves. It is easy to see how volunteers (travelling and online) can contribute more to the project by educating the teachers and helping them develop their lessons

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