

Opening the door to new horizons

When Nicolas Hall asked his friend Richard Clowes to help him find a voluntary work trip suitable for deaf people they realised there was a gap in the market – and decided to fill it themselves

Stephan Pretorius was dropped in at the deep end when he was asked to oversee a mural painting project in a school he was volunteering in in Sri Lanka. The artist, originally from South Africa, already had some designs in mind but now he had to communicate his vision to a group of fellow British volunteers and some students from the school and coordinate their efforts to paint the 10-metre long three-metre tall mural over two weeks. At times the 34-year-old had six or more people working at the same time, all seeking guidance and help. It was a huge challenge but one that saw him grow

in confidence. “I loved doing this,” he enthuses. “I am a trained artist and this really let me develop and expand my skills.”

All of this happened on a VoluntEars trip Stephan was on last December. VoluntEars is a travel company which specialises in overseas volunteering trips for deaf people. Set up by friends Richard Clowes and

Nicolas Hall, VoluntEars works with eight different deaf schools in Sri Lanka, including one in Sandagala, three hours north-east of Colombo where Stephan was volunteering along with four others from Britain.

A typical day on the trip would involve a breakfast of freshly baked bread, omelette, fresh pineapple or mango and a morning spent renovating the deaf school. In addition to

working on the mural, the team repainted the entire two-floor school building, inside and outside. Following lunch of rice, curry, vegetables and fruit, the volunteers would spend the afternoon doing a variety of activities. One afternoon was spent at a Buddhist temple on top of a hill and another visiting a Hindu temple. They visited a huge market to learn about local fresh produce and, the next day, had a lesson in cooking local food. Other activities included Sri Lankan sign language lessons and joining local deaf students in playing games such as popular Sri Lankan game Carroms – played by sliding draughts across

a square board with a hole in each corner. These afternoons encouraged communication between the visitors and the locals – a mix of deaf and hearing people. The overlap in BSL and Sri Lankan sign language meant people could make themselves understood to each other. As Richard says: “It’s a lot of fun because there’s no time pressure and it’s great seeing local and foreign people learning each other’s languages and having so much fun together.”

It was because of a desire to improve communication that VoluntEars came about. Nicolas had been on a few volunteer trips but was alienated from the other volunteers, feeling his efforts and money had been wasted. He asked his friend Richard, who had 16 years experience arranging

worthwhile and exciting volunteering in developing countries, to help him find a trip that would give him an experience similar to those offered by gap year companies but which would be tailored towards the needs of the Deaf community. But they were unable to find anything suitable. They also

met several deaf people who had volunteered

overseas and found that most did not have positive outcomes.

This was often due to insufficient support from the organisers during the trip. Like Nicolas, they were left frustrated by the whole experience.

“This was a huge shame because it meant the diverse range of talents, skills and immense enthusiasm of the deaf volunteers was not being harnessed in developing countries where it can really





Keeley Rodgers, Tom Gerrard, Esther Haines, Charley Perera, Stephan Pretorius with staff at the school

make a difference to others,” says Richard.

Recognising there was a gap in the market, Nicolas and Richard decided to join forces and set up VoluntEars in January 2015 with their first trip taking place in June last year.

Nicolas says: “We work with Deaf communities in Sri Lanka so there’s a common understanding between our volunteers and our Sri Lankan partners right from the outset. There’s also the right kind of support from our staff so nobody feels left out or marginalised at any time.”

He adds that the trips are a good way for volunteers to do hands on work in Sri Lanka: “It will be a great achievement, and also boost their confidence before they continue at college, university or their job.”

The founders are keen to emphasise that while the focus is to organise trips deaf people can enjoy that they are open to hearing people as well. Richard says “our trips are also for hearing people working or training to work with deaf people as well as relatives of deaf people.”

Richard leads the company’s two-week structured trips, which Stephan and his peers were on. Joining Richard on this trip were two local Sri Lankan staff (who he has worked with since 2003) and a communication support

worker fluent in BSL to ensure smooth communication for all volunteers the whole time. The aim of each trip is to remove any communication barriers deaf people might face on other trips, meaning they can get stuck into their work, make new friends and absorb the local culture. The overriding memories when they return are of dinners with local families, pumping water up from a well and doing conservation work with turtles, seeing baby turtles hatch on Christmas Day – a particular highlight – rather than of feeling left out and frustrated.

Esther Haines, who celebrated her 27th birthday on the Sri Lanka trip, said: “I enjoyed visiting different places such as Negombo and Colombo... I also learned a lot about Sri Lankan culture.” Referring to how Sri Lankan people have very little in the way of material possessions but are normally much more content with their lives, she adds: “They work very hard and are very patient people! It was a worthwhile trip.”

Also celebrating his birthday in Sri Lanka was 19-year-old Tom Gerrard, a student at Mary Hare School, currently studying for his A-levels. He said the trip “gave [him] a refreshed perspective on the world and a sense of satisfaction which is hard to get anywhere else”. He goes on: “I like that

it [VoluntEars] was accessible to all and that I had the opportunity to help fellow deaf people. They had a really good balance between volunteering and sightseeing.”

The company also runs flexi-trips which enable people to work at a school for two weeks or longer – working alongside local teachers in one of their partner deaf schools. Flexi volunteers’ work will involve assisting in classes, helping with vocational training and getting involved with sports and other cultural activities. Keegan Hall-Browne, a teacher of the deaf – yet another volunteer who had his birthday on the trip, turning 37 on New Year’s Eve – went over as part of the 2-Week Group Trip but stayed on for an extra two weeks to volunteer at another deaf school. An experienced teacher himself, he worked alongside the local teachers to see how deaf Sri Lankan children are taught.

Having felt somewhat disillusioned with his profession in the UK, the experience reminded Keegan, who is hearing, of what he loved about teaching. “I feel remotivated as a professional.” His help was valued and he was roped into helping out with teacher training, one of the highlights of his trip along with being observed by staff teaching students. He says: “What I liked about the VoluntEars programme



Esther Haines and Keeley Rodgers



Tom Gerrard and Karolina Pakenaite

was the opportunity to work with local students – giving something back. The trip was enlightening, rewarding, gruelling, motivating, amazing.”

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Reflecting on the trips they have organised so far, the company founders are pleased with how things are going just over a year after starting out. For Richard it’s about the people: “Leading the group trips means I’m able to work with the volunteers and really get to know them all. We had a fantastic group of volunteers and I loved seeing them adapt to the Sri Lankan culture, gain confidence working together and see their communication develop with the Sri Lankan deaf students. And of course the positive feedback from the deaf school and our volunteers always makes me proud of what we do!”

Nicolas adds: “I’m really happy that people from the Deaf community in the UK have the opportunity of joining

an organisation which is tailored to their needs so they can be sure of having an experience which is right for them. I know firsthand from my own experiences on organised trips in Australia and the USA where I struggled with communication how important this is.”

For some, volunteer trips can be a life-changing experience. Karolina Pakenaite found it was so in many ways: “I realised that this trip was not about escaping away from life, but for life not to escape from me. Reconnecting spiritually and becoming wiser, I became so much more appreciative of what I have so far. I realised that there’s so much I can give back.”

The 20-year-old maths student from Birmingham University always wanted to travel and work abroad but was nervous about doing so – until she heard about VoluntEars: “I knew this was a perfect opportunity to take. A specialised organisation that guarantees to provide the right support, all my worries vanished. It is

INFORMATION

If you’d like more information about VoluntEars, including new destinations, or if you want to sign up for a trip, whether it be a group trip at Easter, a summer experience, or Christmas away from home next winter, head to www.voluntears.info right now and get in touch!



Top: Richard Clowes. Above: Nicolas Hall (red shirt)

quite rare for me to come across such an opportunity – volunteering overseas with the Deaf community for the Deaf community, I knew that I could not afford to miss out!” She is now reconsidering her career plans, wanting to do something that involves travel.

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Karolina who is hard of hearing didn’t sign before the trip but started picking up BSL from her fellow volunteers and having become close friends with Esther she wanted to carry on learning. One of the first things she did when she returned was to enrol on to a BSL course.

“I wouldn’t have this appetite for my future if it wasn’t for VoluntEars! The adventure has only just begun!”