

# Help Lanka Volunteer Report

***Albert Freeman, Rathgama, 12<sup>th</sup> January to 9<sup>th</sup> February 2007***

## Help Lanka Objectives

I feel I met some, but not all of my objectives. I took some time off teaching to complete some of the other work, and I would have had to take more time away from the schools to do the rest of the *This Is Rathgama* project. I took lots of photos of key locations in the area, produced a map, and wrote about various aspects of the village. However, I didn't get round to organising a treasure hunt or documenting A Day in The Life of Nalinda De Silva.

As well as teaching children English to help with their syllabus, I successfully taught them some simple English songs. Generally they had great enthusiasm for this. I decided it wasn't necessary to buy a guitar for this because the songs were of simple melodic and rhythmic structure. Having said that, the electric keyboard at Ranapanediniya School was very useful. So a musical aid is certainly a help and the children thoroughly enjoyed it.

I also read to the children, as per my objectives, using books I had taken from Bradford Library.

## The Schools

### Ranapanediniya School

I feel this is the school at which I had the most success. The open plan design of the school meant it was often difficult to hear and be heard. But I sometimes used the science lab or the library to overcome this issue. The English teacher, K. Premasiri was often present when I was teaching. He spoke very good English and had a clear grasp of the syllabus. I sometimes brought my own exercises and on other occasions taught what he chose from the syllabus. I taught a range of ages on each visit, from grade 3 to 11, with each teaching period lasting for 40 minutes. This was usually long enough to successfully complete a lesson.

The children were better behaved and paid more attention to me here than at Siri Sumana school. This may have been partly due the open plan layout - another teacher would have seen any misdemeanour.

I got on well with all the staff at this school. I really enjoyed sitting down to eat with the other teachers during the mid-morning interval.

### Siri Sumana School

Siri Sumana School was quite difficult at times. On every visit to this school I taught five grade 4 classes, 30 minutes with each. This posed various problems. 30 minutes was rarely long enough to thoroughly complete one task with classes of about 30 children. Taking into account the time it takes to write on the black board, explain the exercise, have the children write things down, and then mark their work, it was always a squeeze. Twice as long with each class would have enabled me to take my time

over a topic, and also to finish of with something 'fun' like a song. But I gather this would not be looked upon favourably by the Ministry Of Education.

I attempted to use the OHP, thinking this would save time, not having to write on the blackboard at the start of each class lesson. But there were various obstacles to this in the classrooms, including access to power, a place to put the projector, and the amount of daylight coming in through the door and windows. I suggested to Nalinda the possibility of Help Lanka volunteers working from one classroom, and having a different set of children come in for each period. I'm not sure how feasible this idea is though in reality.

Another issue that was a problem at Siri Sumana was discipline. Each classroom was an enclosed space, and the resident teacher would usually leave the room while I taught. The English teacher would sometimes be with me, but not always. I was usually comfortable with being alone to teach. But, although some of the children were keen to learn, some of them were badly behaved, and being out of sight of another teacher meant there was no controlling element visible to the kids. I found that sometimes making them stand up and read things out alone embarrassed them into behaving better. But this didn't always work. Some of the children were disruptive and had little respect for me. The most distressing thing for me was when a child cried. I had no way of establishing exactly what had made them cry without the presence of a Sinhala-speaking teacher in the room. I felt this pupil would have left school that day very disheartened, and I really didn't like that thought.

The English teacher at Siri Sumana didn't actually speak particularly good English. I don't mean that to read as a criticism, just an observation. I sometimes taught lessons I had decided upon, and sometimes asked her if there were any topics she would like me to prepare lessons on.

### **Nirasha School**

Being an out-of-school class, Nirasha threw up different issues to Ranapanediniya and Siri Sumana. Because I was usually teaching a group of four or five children of different ages, it was often not appropriate to do exercises I had done at the other schools. I found the best way to keep the children interested was to mix up the activities. For instance, a word search followed by me reading to them, then a song, then hopscotch outside, then a written or spoken exercise.

### **Baranasooriya Children's Orphanage**

I feel things didn't really work to well with Baranasooriya. They didn't really get much of my time. They only had a couple of time slots each week when it was suitable for me to visit them. And we must have misunderstood each other because on the first such agreed visit they said it wasn't a good time, and allocated me different days, starting the following week. Baranasooriya were also unlucky with my allocated days coinciding with days when I wasn't teaching for one reason or another.

On the few days when I was there I had an amorphous group of children to teach. Because of the nature of the orphanage I had children of varying ages and abilities, which was to be expected. So I mixed and matched the activities, a bit like at Nirasha. But without an actual classroom to teach in, I found the structure was very loose. Children would come and go at will, and there was little I could do about this.

There were also a few very disruptive children, who made things difficult not only for me but other children, who I felt were being picked on. I do feel it was worthwhile going though. There was one instance I'm proud of, when I managed to get a particularly shy boy to have a go at hopscotch, despite the intimidation from other boys.

### **My pre-departure expectations**

One thing that surprised me was the low level of English spoken by those people I was working and living with. I had thought my host Mrs Mendis, being a teacher, would have a fairly good grasp of English. In fact I soon found that at the schools it was only the teachers of English, and the head-teachers who spoke English. This wasn't a disappointment to me, but it was a surprise.

I expected to feel a big culture shock upon arrival. But in fact, I almost immediately settled into the place and my work.

I had not expected each teaching period to be so short, and to be teaching such a great number of different classes during each visit to a school. 30 or 40 minutes wasn't really long enough to mix and match several different activities. Had I known how it would be I would have simplified, and shortened my lesson ideas from the onset.

### **Support from Help Lanka UK**

Before, during and after my trip I have been very satisfied with the way Help Lanka UK have conducted the process. The conversations I've had in person or by email have always been very useful, and I've felt that Sam has understood and listened extremely well, inspiring confidence in me that Help Lanka know what they're doing.

### **Support from Help Lanka co-ordinator in Sri Lanka**

Nalinda De Silva was supportive of me in the work I was doing for Help Lanka. He showed me places I would need to use, for instance to photocopy teaching materials, and gave me several ideas for things I could do. The Galle trip with Nirasha School is a good example of this. He devised the day's itinerary for this.

Nalinda and my tuk-tuk driver Manju were also a great help with the mapping project, showing me where things were, and which things were of importance.

#### **.Accommodation and food**

I was pleasantly surprised by the standard of the accommodation. I wasn't expecting a proper shower and toilet. The room I was in was a good size, and very clean, but it got extremely hot and damp.

The food was tasty, healthy, varied and plentiful. Mrs Mendis was always happy to tell or show me what ingredients she was using, and she gave me advice and tips on how to make Sri Lankan dishes.

## **How Help Lanka could improve the Volunteer placement**

### **Eco-tourism**

I would recommend that Help Lanka considers the environmental and ethical implications of volunteering placements. There are several websites that I used before deciding to go to Sri Lanka, and I think these would be useful for Help Lanka and also prospective volunteers.

- This site has a code of practice for volunteers, and another for the sending organisation, that are both worth reading and signing up to:  
[www.comhlamh.org](http://www.comhlamh.org)
- COMHLAMH also produce the following site:  
[www.volunteeringoptions.org](http://www.volunteeringoptions.org)
- These websites have useful resources about ethical- and eco- tourism:  
[www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)  
[www.tourismconcern.org.uk](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk)
- These sites offers advice & information for people who are interested in international volunteering:  
[www.ethicalvolunteering.org](http://www.ethicalvolunteering.org)

### **Advice for future volunteers**

#### **Accommodation**

Consider sensitive issues, like footwear in the house, or taking photos of strangers.

#### **Schools**

If you are living with Mrs. Mendis in Hegoda, you can easily walk to Rananpanadeniya School in 15 minutes. Many people will glance at you inquisitively and say hello, and it's better for the environment than using a tuk-tuk for such a short journey.

Take manyokka crisps to Rananpanadeniya School for the mid-morning interval. I did once, and found the teachers were very partial to them, so took them again on each visit.

Don't try and cram too much into each lesson at the schools, and be wary of pitching exercises that are at too high a level of English for the children. Some of the children have a very low grasp of the English language, so in a 30-minute lesson with 30 children, you may find you only get one simple exercise done.

Give the children tasks to write down which can them be marked. The prospect of a red tick and a comment in their books seemed to inspire even the least enthusiastic of children to partake in the exercise. But beware of copying. I suggest holding onto all marked and corrected exercise books until all the children have finished. Then give all the books back at the same time.

Ask the English teacher at each school if there is any topic they are keen for you to prepare a lesson on. This helps keep the consistency with the syllabus, but it's not

essential. I got the impression the children and teachers were pleased to have lessons on things I had come up with too.

### **Food and health**

If you're eating out, you can minimise the risk of food poisoning by wisely selecting what you eat. If you eat dishes that have been freshly cooked, e.g. fried rice/noodles, kothu or hoppers, you should be fine, as the recent heat should kill any potentially harmful bugs. But I'd strongly recommend avoiding the optional extras that come with the food, such as seeni sambol (sweet chilli dip), a bowl of cold gravy, or a bottle of ketchup. All of these are susceptible to carrying bacteria that could make you ill.

Also, rude as it may seem, don't drink glasses of tap water that may be brought to the table while you're eating. Don't be shy to have your own bottled water, and drink from this instead.

I followed these simple guidelines, and I stayed healthy. Sri Lankans seem to have more tolerance to bacteria and bugs than Westerners. Don't be tempted to think, well, it's ok for my Sri Lankan friends, so it must be all right for me too. Of course, you might be lucky, and get away with eating and drinking everything you see; not everything has harmful bacteria in it. But I feel the risks outweigh the minor inconvenience of these few simple rules.

### **Eco-tourism**

Consider the environmental and ethical implications of your visit to Sri Lanka. For instance always ask before taking photos of people; spend wisely, supporting local business as much as you can; leave coral and shells at the beach; consider the amount of waste you produce – plastic bottles you will go through like hot cakes and this is unavoidable, but waste disposal is not as efficient as in the West so be mindful of unnecessary packaging when you go shopping.

There are several useful websites with information about eco-tourism. Some of those I used are:

- This site has a code of practice for volunteers that is worth signing up to:  
[www.comhlamh.org](http://www.comhlamh.org)
- COMHLAMH also produce the following site:  
[www.volunteeringoptions.org](http://www.volunteeringoptions.org)
- These websites have useful resources about ethical- and eco- tourism:  
[www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)  
[www.tourismconcern.org.uk](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk)
- These sites offers advice & information for people who are interested in international volunteering:  
[www.ethicalvolunteering.org](http://www.ethicalvolunteering.org)

I would be happy to talk to any prospective volunteer about anything at all.