

Note from *people and places*: this volunteer's placement was designed specifically for them – they went through our full matching process, as we've been doing with you. The placement report indicates their particular skills and experience – yours may be similar or completely different – your own placement will make best use of **your** experience and skills. Every volunteer is different – in what they give and what they gain. Reports from previous volunteers serve to give you as good a picture as possible about the project. If you have any questions about any of the detail in this report please do not hesitate to contact me at dianne@travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk

Volunteer placement report Treak Cambodia

Volunteer: Tilly Bignell

What was your motivation for volunteering?

It has been a long ambition of mine to go travelling, and as part of this experience I wanted to complete some volunteer work. However, I did not know where or how?

Over 2 years ago, I was introduced to the concept of *sustainable tourism*, and People and Places was recommended to me, priding itself on ethical and responsible volunteer travel. On Saturday 1st February 2020, I registered my interest on the People and Places website, submitted my application and my skills were matched with The Gambia and Treak Community Centre (TCC) in Cambodia.

(Note from *people and places*: it does not normally take us two years to set up a placement! Tilly's plans for travel had to be put on hold because the Covid 19 pandemic made all travel impossible for most of 2020 and all of 2021.)

I chose Cambodia because I was also interested in travelling around South East Asia and completing two other volunteering projects in Malaysia and Indonesia. Therefore, I planned to visit multiple countries in South East Asia over 5 months, and volunteering along the way.

Additionally, in the UK, I work as a Children's Nurse in a Children's Emergency Department. This motivated me to consider volunteer projects related to working with children, education and healthcare. I wanted to utilise my skills and knowledge in healthcare to benefit the projects I worked for. I also had an interest in teaching, so Treak Community Centre seemed to be the perfect match.

Placement dates and project:

Placement dates: Monday 22nd November 2022 – Friday 17th November 2022 (4 weeks)

Project: Treak Community Centre

Pre departure preparation:

Were you happy with the information we shared with you during your preparation for this placement? what information did you consider most useful?

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Yes, I was prepared for my placement.

Immediately following the online registration, I was introduced to Dianne. She outlined the matching process and costs. She was friendly, helpful and easily contactable. Over the 2 years of planning, we exchanged several emails, telephone calls and video calls.

During the preparation phase, I participated in several virtual events hosted by People and Places. For example, I attended the People and Places Volunteer Meeting (online social event). This gave me the opportunity to meet previous volunteers from TCC, and I was able to contact them after the event to ask questions about their experiences and any advice they had to offer. Additionally, I took part in the story book reading initiative and submitted a short video of myself reading a storybook in English for Dara (Headteacher) to use in the online learning programme at TCC during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was also introduced to Dara and Michael (Project Manager) via Zoom before my placement and I was able to keep up to date with the latest news from TCC with their monthly newsletter and Facebook posts.



(Note from people and places: Tilly maintained a real interest in her volunteer placement throughout the two years of Covid 19. She was always happy to take part in all initiatives to maintain contact between the volunteer programme and our partners in Cambodia, and this meant when she finally travelled she had already built up a meaningful relationship with them)

Orientation and preparation at the start of the placement

On Sunday 21st September 2022, I walked through the arrivals gate at Siem Reap International Airport to see a man holding a piece of white A4 paper with my name written on it. I knew my airport transfer had kindly been pre-arranged, but I did not expect a tuk-tuk! Maybe it was naïve of me, but I had no preconceptions before arriving in Cambodia.

I arrived at Victory Guesthouse (safely), and there was Sophea (Admin Staff) waiting for me with a beaming smile. She introduced herself and welcomed me to Cambodia. Introductions led to a few administrative tasks and a short tour of the town.

I was rented a bike for a small fee, which was provided by the school and I was expected to use the bike to cycle to school each day. However, tuk-tuks are widely available as an alternative (depending on the weather or by preference). I quickly understood the rules of the road in my tuk-tuk on route the guesthouse from the airport – there are few, and after being presented with my bike it dawned on me that I would be cycling on these chaotic roads each morning and afternoon. I have to admit, on my first day I was terrified. You have to be very vigilant! On the first couple of days, Sophea accompanied me on the

journey to and from school but soon enough, I could remember the route and I became increasingly confident on the roads. I was riding 'Cambodian style'.

Note from people and places: although most volunteers choose to rent a bike and enjoy the freedom this offers, a tuk-tuk can be arranged for anyone who prefers not to use this form of transport)

On my first day of school, I walked through the school gate with the big yellow Treak Community Centre sign hanging above it and I was welcomed by the staff and students. I was introduced to the teachers and staff from ConCERT. I had previously met Dara and Micheal on Zoom, but it was wonderful to finally meet them in person. I was given a tour of the school by Viphou (Deputy Headteacher) presented with my timetable by Dara and I started my first class. In my first week, I was able to develop an understanding of my role in the classroom, the level of English understood by the students, how I could support the teachers and how the school was managed. By using this knowledge, I was able to understand how I could use my skills to benefit the school and by the end of my final week, Dara and I had established several projects that I could start during my 4-week placement. I have listed the topics and projects below:

1. Week 2 – PSHE lesson: Personal Hygiene and Oral Hygiene (all students)
2. Week 3 – PSHE lesson: Healthy Living (including '5 a day', hydration, and exercise) (all students)
3. Week 4 – PSHE lesson: Puberty Workshop (only Level 1 and Level 2 students)

Additional projects:

4. Create a Health Information Leaflet for Parents
5. Promote Healthy Eating (with a focus on school tuck shop)

Your experience and work – including what resources you may have left behind and with whom – please attach copies of any written resources you may have left behind and let us know of any others.



For each of the PSHE lessons, I created a lesson plan, activities and resources for the teachers and students. I delivered a lesson on each topic to every class, adapting for age and development. All of my resources have been saved onto the school's Google drive, where it can be easily accessed by the teachers and I hope the lesson plans can be replicated in the future with the lesson packages I have provided.

Following my lesson on Personal Hygiene, I displayed posters (which I had used as visual aids in the lesson) around the school to encourage the children to wash their hands.

For the Puberty Workshop, I brought some sanitary products from the local supermarket accompanied by Viphou. She was able to support me in buying an affordable and easily accessible product to show to the students and demonstrate how to use. I then asked Salin to create a small drawstring bag in the Sewing Workshop to hold the sanitary products that I had bought. The bag would be kept in the office for students to access if required, and I informed the students of this during the workshop. I also provided a bin for the students in the toilet to dispose of toilet paper and sanitary products.

Alongside lesson planning, I decided to create an information leaflet for parents on common medical presentations in children and young people. I wanted to use my knowledge, as a Children's Nurse to support the community and provide advice to parents. I thought this would be valuable because I quickly understood the differences in healthcare services between the UK and Cambodia.

I devised a strategy with Dara for the school to promote healthy snacks in the school shop and to encourage eating '5 a day'. I also discussed the introduction of a rewards system with Dara and the other volunteers, to encourage the children to choose healthy snacks in the school shop.

Finally, during my placement Dara expressed an interest in incorporating physical education into the student timetable. My Mum is an athletics coach, so I kindly asked her to provide some basic activities for the school. She also had email correspondence with Dara and a short video call to discuss her ideas and how she could support the school virtually. My Mum, Serena Bignell, provided several games and activities for the teachers and students at TCC.

Successes, disappointments and challenges of your placement

Success:

Overall, the topics I chose and the delivery of the lessons were a success. I hope the teachers will have the confidence to teach the lesson plans in the future and continue to instil the students with information about the importance of washing their hands, cleaning their teeth, as well as having a healthy diet and lifestyle. Handwashing is simple, but it *will* save lives, reduce the risk of infection and ensure the children develop into strong, healthy young adults.

Challenges:

Part of my lesson on Healthy Living, focused on eating '5 a day', a phrase many of the children had not heard before. In my first week, I was shocked and saddened watching the children eating chocolate and biscuits for breakfast, followed by, ice-cream and Coca-Cola for snacks. I only thought about how detrimental this was to their dental health and wellbeing. This motivated me to encourage the school to offer a variety of healthy snacks in the school shop. However, in doing so I was confronted with cultural and financial challenges. Dara explained to me that the profits made from the school shop was the main source of income for Kimpong. If the children did not like the products she had to offer, they could simply walk for 2 minutes and buy snacks from another local seller. It was her livelihood. Therefore, my role was to deliver an impactful lesson to create awareness and then, promote healthy living with posters and create a reward system to encourage the children to buy healthy snacks from the school shop, as well as work with Kimpong (Seller) to introduce a choice of healthy snacks and fruit for the children to purchase.

In each of my projects, I needed to understand the lifestyle and reality of a Cambodian child. For example, I was delivering a lesson on handwashing but not knowing how many children had access to clean sanitation at home. I was teaching children how to brush their teeth but unaware of how many children actually had a toothbrush or toothpaste. I was shocked by the dental issues children and young people were experiencing at a young age, and knowing it was highly unlikely they would be able to afford dental treatment. I was asked by the children if they could brush their teeth with lime or salt crystals as an

alternative to toothpaste. I was informed of the affordability and accessibility of unhealthy food compared to healthy food. This is why it was important to me to encourage healthy living, but I needed to have cultural awareness to support and teach in a beneficial way. On way I tried to assess this was to ask questions at the start of lesson. For example, who has had breakfast this morning? Who brushed their teeth today? Who has washed their hands? Put your hand up if you have a toothbrush and toothpaste at home? I asked these questions partly to develop and understanding of what the children and young people had access to at home, but also as a form of safeguarding to ensure the school could offer support if required to any child that may be being neglected.

I taught the same lesson to all of the students and this added the challenge of having to adapt and tailor the same lesson for different age groups, developmental stages and also, to their individual level of English and Khmer. It was interesting to assess the varying level of understanding of Khmer and English in each class, because some children were 'slow learners' and may need additional support, others were very fluent in English and had been taught by their parents.

I would also say, as a volunteer, you have a limited time to create lessons and provide support to the school, through resources, lesson plans and activities. I decided to choose several topics as well as other projects to complete in a 4-week period and I soon realised that I had given myself a lot of work. I would advise you to be realistic about time, and how much you can achieve within the timeframe of your placement.

What was the highlight of your volunteer experience?

I have many highlights, but to chose one, would be my memory I have of the students washing their hands at the sink with soap and water, and singing the 'Happy Birthday' song with smiles on their faces and laughing with one another, whilst also giving me a cheeky grin to say "Teacher Tilly, we are washing our hands just like you taught us"! (I taught the children to sing the 'Happy Birthday' song twice in English for the duration of washing their hands).

Would you recommend volunteering to other people or not? Please tell us why.

Yes. I would certainly recommend volunteering work. However, I would say it is challenging and not a decision to take lightly, it is not suitable for everyone. You need to be dedicated, committed, hardworking, open, honest, accepting and resilient. If you work hard, and you have the correct attitude you will certainly reap the rewards.

I was told before I started volunteering, you can't be the change so support others to be the change themselves. Aim to be a sustainable, responsible and ethical volunteer!

How did you spend your leisure time?

I would often spend the evenings after school planning for lessons and preparing activities.

I joined a local gym, so I would attend gym classes in the evening.

I would often spend time in the communal, restaurant area at Victory Guesthouse rather than in my room because I enjoyed socialising with other guests and meeting new people. Some of the other guests at Victory Guesthouse were also volunteers working for a similar NGO.

I used the swimming pool at the guesthouse, which was very refreshing on a hot day.

I tried to use the weekdays as 'workdays' so I could explore Siem Reap and the surrounding area at the weekends. I spent my first weekend exploring Siem Reap town itself. I planned a self-guided walking tour and I celebrated my 24th birthday!

On my second weekend, I arranged a 2-day tour of the Angkorian Temples with Mr Chheur (an ex-teacher from TCC). It was excellent, and I would certainly recommend. Moy arranged a tuk-tuk for Chheur and I to complete the small circuit, big circuit and rolus group.

The following weekend, I did the Siem Reap Cycling Tour (recommended by Viphou) and visited Phnom Krom Mountain at sunset with Carolyn (volunteer), Viphou, Srey Rath, Dara, Sophea, Kimpong and Chheur.

On my final weekend, I visited several markets in Siem Reap: The Chocolate Garden; Made in Cambodia and Kandal Village. I also visited the Botanical Garden and Theams Gallery.

Other activities I did included:

- Phare Circus
- Village Tour with Salin
- Cooking Class with Salin
- Trek Trek Bike Ride practice
- Samatoa Lotus Farm
- Friday Night Volunteer Dinner



My favourite restaurants in Siem Reap:

- Mamma Shop
- Haven
- Viva
- Elias
- New Leaf Eatery
- Khmer Kitchen

My favourite cafes:

- The Little Red Fox
- Sister Shrey
- Footprints
- The Chocolate Garden

How was your accommodation?

Victory Guesthouse is super, I would highly recommend. The staff, Moy and Penny, are welcoming, hospitable and approachable. They provide breakfast, lunch and dinner, a laundry service, and were able to book tours and tuk-tuks when asked. The room was clean and comfortable. It was in a good location. It was good value for money.

Anything else you would like to share with future volunteers about your placement:

Bring a laptop.

Please note – this report is supplied by a former volunteer and the contents are intended solely for your information and personal use. *people and places* has permission to publish this information to you as a future volunteer. Please check with us if you would like to publish it beyond your own circle of friends and family. Thank you.