

India through different eyes

Tamara Elizabeth shares her experiences during a service project in India during January 2010.

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Exotic India - what a feast for the senses! That is what I and 24 other women - students and young professionals - discovered when we arrived at New Delhi in January 2010, to complete a three-week service project run by Creston College, Sydney, Australia and

Fernhall Study Centre, Auckland, New Zealand in partnership with Reledev Australia.

We were mesmerised from the get-go: weaving in and out of chaotic traffic that included three-wheelers and cows, spotting every colour of the rainbow and then some in the form of vibrant saris, sampling tasty cuisine that featured a lot of spice and cottage cheese, picking up Hindi words from our drivers and the kids we met along the way, wandering the cool sanctuaries of the Taj Mahal and sacred tombs...

But we weren't there just to gawp from the "safety" of a fancy tourist hotel. We were there to help out, to use our holidays for something different, to give rather than just indulge ourselves. Seeing a foreign country through a volunteer project was certainly a different way to

travel, but as we found out, it could be the best way.

India is a developing country. Yes, we saw rich tradition and beautiful landscapes. But with that there exists a lot of poverty and a lot of suffering. There were kids, too young to be out alone, begging on the streets. People cooked their meals on the sidewalk, and other people used that sidewalk as a toilet. Whole houses consisted of single rooms smaller than an average bathroom, such as the one right next-door to our conference-style accommodation.

Weekday mornings were spent teaching classes at schools run by a large Indian NGO, Deepalaya. We were greeted warmly by the kids, whose clean clothes and neatly combed hair made it difficult to tell that they lived in the slums. We also helped at Education on Wheels (EOW), a bus-turned-classroom that

went into the slums to reach kids who wouldn't otherwise have access to education. If there was one thing common to all these kids, it was the enthusiasm they had for their studies, and how they didn't take it for granted.

The afternoons were spent at Kamalini Vocational Schools for Women. At the end of a dusty lane, the humble four-roomed building was the location of classes which enable women to become more independent through skills (such as sewing, cooking and computer literacy) that they can use to gain employment, better their standards of living and grow in self-confidence.

The last place we worked at was Cheshire Disabled Home, which was probably the most difficult activity, helping with physio and craft activities. By the last week, there were the most amazing moments to

share. Residents that seemed completely immobile were taking short walks, and others that had initially showed no reaction to us were smiling and laughing in welcome.

Working away from the usual tourist attractions, we saw areas that would generally escape notice, and met people who would have otherwise not crossed our paths. We didn't just see the tiny dwellings and muddy paths of the slum areas, we also saw the brightening smiles of the children running past. We saw that development wasn't just about international but rather that it has to occur from within, as we witnessed firsthand. And in working with the beautiful people, we realised that we had gained a lot more than we could have possibly given.

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