

VOLUNTEER ABROAD

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This Summer I spent six weeks in Kolkata in India volunteering with The Hope Foundation, thanks to the Volunteer Abroad Programme funded by CIT. Although I had meetings with HOPE staff and a past HOPE volunteer I still had virtually no idea what to expect. Throughout the car journey to my accommodation I was just astonished by the madness of Kolkata's streets – there seemed to be no traffic rules at all, beeping constantly, and weaving in and out of each other, red lights were driven through and sometimes green lights were stopped for. There were families of up to five individuals on one motorbike. It was crazy but I absolutely loved it.

During my first two days there I felt like I was dreaming. By the third day I had fully "arrived". Although Kolkata is so different to Ireland I was surprised how easily I settled in and got used to everything. The other HOPE volunteers showed me around for my first week and brought me to different projects with them.

One of my main projects was teaching English to girls and young woman (aged 18-30) who were being trained in stitching and young boys and girls (aged 15-21) who were doing computer training. Many of these students came from underprivileged families and therefore had never received any education. The training funded by HOPE could be their only chance of getting the necessary qualification to be able to get a job to support their respective families. English is a very important language in Kolkata and is needed for lots of jobs. Every time

I went in there I was greeted with a happy, cheerful class. "Good morning ma'am, how are you ma'am?" They really valued education and wanted to learn. During my last week I helped them compile their CVs and prepared them for interview questions as they would finish their training in September and would be looking for jobs.

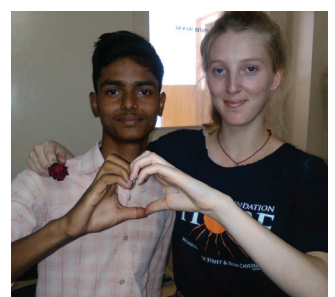
I also spent a lot of time in Punorjibon Boys Home; a residential home for past drug addicted orphans or run-away boys and girls. Girl2B is the name given to a protection home for girls. I honestly couldn't have asked to meet a lovelier, more caring, kind hearted bunch of children, so beautiful inside and out. Both of these homes were just around the corner of the HOPE apartments so any spare time I could spend there, I did.

For my first day in Girl2B they came crowding around me. They sat me down and one girl brushed my hair and braided it for me. Another girl came with a plate of rice and curried chicken and started feeding me out of her hands. I was normally in there from 4pm until 8 or 9pm, I helped them with their homework or to prepare for an English exam they had coming up. Whenever I wanted to leave, they'd beg me to stay and ask me when I would be back. Downstairs in Punorjibon was a laundry where some of the boys received training. When I had an hour free during the day I would go in and do an English lesson with the boys there.

I heard a HOPE volunteer say, we aren't exactly essential, because they

have such wonderful Indian staff, but we are the cherry on top and add something special for the children. Some of the Aunties (Indian female staff) told us that they noticed such a difference in the children when we were around, how happy they got the minute we walked in the door. We had weekends off so one weekend we went to the Himalayas where we went on a helicopter ride and paragliding, which was absolutely epic. My favourite weekends were those which I got to spend in Kolkata with the HOPE children. Bringing the Punorjibon boys to the park and having a sports day with them, meeting up with some of the HOPE girls in town and treating them to pizza or the cinema, or getting to meet some of the HOPE girl's families and visiting their homes.

I felt so content and at home volunteering with The Hope Foundation in Kolkata. The people really touched my heart with their loving and good hearted nature. Although most of them have so little materially and have been through so much, they are so grateful for everything they do have. This is only the beginning of my journey to Kolkata with The Hope Foundation and I would recommend everyone to give volunteering abroad a go. There is really no better way to spend your time. I always wanted to volunteer and the Volunteer Abroad Scholarship gave me the kick I needed to put my thoughts into action. I want to thank CIT for their support and for granting me this amazing opportunity and unforgettable experience.



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