

Volunteering at Madurai Seed July 2018

In July 2018 I volunteered, for a second time, as an English teacher with the educational charity Madurai Seed. I came to know the organisation through John Potts and have been inspired by the work they do in the slum area of Karumbalai, in Tamil Nadu, India. I thoroughly enjoyed both my visits, and was extremely well looked after. The following is a brief summary of my experiences and a short diary of my daily routine. I hope it will be useful.

Classes and teaching:

The school is run by the founder, Karthik, his wife Elaa and former volunteer Arun and offers classes and activities pretty much seven days per week. All classes are held in the evenings, so I was often free in the mornings to visit sights and explore the city and surroundings, sometimes accompanied by Madurai Seed volunteers for conversation practice. Afternoons were usually spent avoiding the heat and planning lessons, and in the evenings, I went to school.

Karthik and Elaa are keen for the students at Madurai to experience a different kind of learning to what they generally know from the state school system. They want classes to be fun and creative to keep the children and young people, especially girls, in school, off the streets, and for the children who attend their classes to have access to ideas and activities beyond their limited environment, to bring the world to their classroom. Apart from the standard school subjects, Madurai Seed organises art, music and dance workshops, film evenings, holiday camps, theatre productions, visits to monuments, excursions, festivals and various other projects.

The premises are rented, often accommodating up to three different classes in one small room. Classrooms have blackboards and one larger room has a whiteboard (and possibly a flipchart). The school also has a library with coursebooks at different levels, readers and EFL teaching books, laptop and iPad I believe. I took my iPad with me but did not use it, or other electronic equipment, for any lessons.

I was asked to focus on conversation classes for a specially selected group of around fifteen promising students from different levels. I found the group immense fun to teach, but “conversation” was a tall order given that the level of English is very basic – I’d say A1. The students have little opportunity to speak in large school classes and they lack the confidence and language to express themselves. Consequently, I ended up doing most of the talking in the class to begin with.

Pronunciation is also a major issue; many students have difficulty producing the aspirated consonants /p/ and /t/, instead using /b/ and /d/. Also /j/ is often inserted before vowels at the beginning of a word, especially /e/ and /ei/ leading to misunderstandings where I hear *yearly* instead of *early* or *yet* instead of *eight*. Speakers seem to understand each other perfectly, but to non-Indian English speakers this makes listening challenging.

I abandoned the “just talk” idea and read a story with my class. The idea was to provide interest through the story, work on vocabulary and practice pronunciation, hopefully building confidence and resulting in listening and speaking. The class seemed to enjoy reading aloud and working on frequently mispronounced words and sounds. It also offered practice in extended passages of language as opposed to students’ standard one-, two- or maximum three-word utterances. I feel this worked quite well as the learners didn’t have to worry about building grammatically correct sentences themselves, but could simply experience reading, listening and ideally responding to meaningful, longer passages of English. We followed up on reading with comprehension tasks, vocabulary and pronunciation activities and games – hangman was a massive hit as were all playful activities!

I was told that pupils in school are used to being called on by the teacher to respond and were initially quite quiet. For this reason, I found it useful to try to learn the children’s names, although I didn’t manage to memorise all, and of course the more vocal learners’ names were more easily memorable. I would have liked to work with songs, and I think this would work well, but I ran out of time.

I also led a Sunday morning workshop on job interviews for the volunteer teachers. I would estimate volunteers' productive English level at around A2 (although they seem to know about some quite exotic grammar beyond this level), so this was again quite an ambitious undertaking. We especially wanted to practise being interviewed by a panel, rather than one-to-one interviews, as this reflects reality for job-seekers. We firstly discussed interview situations and their challenges and here too I found volunteers' confidence and ability to use English, at a very simple sentence level, quite limited. Moving on from this, we gathered a bank of useful language and expressions from previous sessions and workshops on the subject. This worked very well and then the final part of the workshop involved role play as interview panel and interviewees. The roleplays were definitely the highlight!

Getting there and getting around:

On both visits to Madurai I have flown Swiss to Mumbai, spent the night in a hotel near the airport and flown on the next day, arriving early afternoon. I feel this is the most efficient and least complicated way to get there, especially if you are limited for time, and it was not significantly more expensive.

In Madurai, I mostly walked to the school and as I was alone, was usually chauffeured home to the hotel at night on the back of a motorbike by one of the volunteers. When exploring further afield in the city, I often took auto-rickshaws and agreed the price before getting in – from the Northgate to the centre of town or the temple around 80 rupees as far as I can remember. For trips out of the city I used taxis and was usually accompanied by volunteers, so they negotiated fees. A couple of times I used buses, not the most comfortable of journeys but fine over shorter distances and quite an experience.

Accommodation:

I stayed at the Northgate Hotel both times I visited Madurai Seed, but there are plenty of other options. The Northgate is a reasonably-priced, mid-range Indian hotel within easy walking distance of the school, once you've mastered the art of crossing the main road – (there is actually a crossing further up the road). The rooms to the front on the main road are very noisy so it's good to ask for a room to the back of the building. The food in the hotel is good; however I didn't enjoy the windowless, over-air-conditioned restaurant and often opted to eat in my room. Sometimes I asked for a picnic breakfast and went to the Eco park near Karumbalai. The hotel packed a feast of different dishes and there are plenty of grateful takers of breakfast leftovers along the Gandhi Museum Road, so this worked well. I also frequently ate cooked snacks from street vendors and kiosks, and this was usually excellent. I like the restaurant further up from the hotel on the corner – a good place to drink tea, I found. On both trips I had no significant health problems beyond a slight stomach bug last year, probably because I inadvertently drank tap water.

DIARY

Thursday 19.07.2018:

I flew direct from Zürich to Mumbai, spent the night in an airport hotel there, arriving in Madurai in the early afternoon. Karthik, Elaa and Arun picked me up at the airport and accompanied me to the Northgate Hotel, my home for the next 2 weeks. After a brief rest, I had my first motorbike ride from the hotel to Karumablai and Madurai Seed. We discussed goals for the 2 weeks of my stay – conversation classes with volunteers and students to build confidence, and also a weekend workshop on basic job interview skills. Then I did a quick tour of the evening classes to say hello to everyone – such a warm welcome!

Friday 20.07.2018

Visited Sri Meenakshi temple at 5.30am with Anand, Viggi and Elaa – a completely different atmosphere to daytime or evenings there, calm, quiet and relatively unpeopled. I went back to the hotel for breakfast and then went for a walk in Goripalayam, the market area behind the hotel. In the afternoon I also visited the American College and was given permission to wander round the campus with a guide.

In the evening I had my first lesson with group of students from different levels that Elaa and Karthik selected for some basic conversation classes – “just talking”. This is difficult, as I remember from my last visit. Students lack basic vocabulary and structure, as well as confidence, so conversation is a lot of my questions, mostly followed by very brief, or one- word answers.

Saturday 21.07.18

Got up early and went with a group of volunteers to visit Varichiyur, a cluster of small Jain temples outside Madurai. The volunteers are seriously into film and photography so there was lots of posing, selfies and endless photo studies of feathers, butterflies, blossoms and landscapes. But mostly selfies! They clearly enjoy escaping from the city.

This afternoon I paid a visit to my favourite tailor from last time, close to Meenakshi temple. I ordered some salwar kameez – lovely block print fabrics and much cooler and more comfortable than western clothes in this climate. I can collect them tomorrow.

This evening I watched a conversation class with Arun and Elaa.



Sunday 22.07.18

Today we returned to Varichiyur around 5.30 this morning to film a theatre production that the school wrote and developed at one of their summer camps. I saw many familiar volunteer faces. Everyone chipped in to prepare the actors for the performance, from costumes and make-up to direction, filming and even refreshments for the whole crew. We had a wonderful open-air breakfast of tea, idli, sambar and coconut chutney served on banana leaves. Of course, there was much discussion, everyone had their ideas to contribute which meant many takes and retakes. When work was done there was time for the children to enjoy being out of the city and a flurry of selfies, portraits lots of laughter ensued. We took the bus back to Madurai.

This evening was film evening – a Hindi film about caste, corruption, good and evil in a rural village setting. Of course, there was the obligatory handsome, strong hero!



Monday 23.07.18

This morning Karthik and I visited the government school where Arun works. His class consisted of about 10 young boys in 8th standard, mainly from low-caste, labourer families. They have little parental supervision as their parents are compelled to work, and school is very difficult for them. Some also live in hostels in Madurai as it is too far to travel from their villages on a daily basis.

In the afternoon I wandered around the market area close to the temple. I love the hardware stores packed with copper and aluminium kitchen equipment and ornaments. I bought a picnic caddy with several layers of containers – I've always wanted one. Also bought some small gifts for back home.

This evening I worked with my mixed class again – we're reading "The Adventures of Sinbad". I included some vocabulary and speaking activities, more controlled conversation where I can ensure they have the language to answer questions. A game of hangman at the end became a riot – great fun and no inhibitions here.

Tuesday 24.07.18

This morning I went with Karthik to see the Kaleidoscope centre, a small centre for alternative culture on the roof top of Professor Prabhakar's offices. The construction of a roof and furnishings were largely funded, I believe, by Keith, one of the Swiss Friends of Madurai Seed. This space offers lots of possibilities that Madurai Seed don't have in the tiny rooms they rent in Karumbalai. They hold workshops and other activities here.

Elaa and Kaarthik tried to talk me into an overnight trip to Chennai but I really want to stay and work with the children and volunteers. I would actually like to be busier.

This evening I continued with more of Sinbad, vocabulary and pronunciation activities – typical problems are the "y" students insert before a lot of /e/ and /ai/ sounds, and also "p", "t", "b" and "d". Students seem to enjoy some playful pronunciation drills and we had the obligatory hangman riot at the end of the lesson.

Wednesday 25.07.18

I got up early and went for a swim at the Pandiyan swimming pool – small pool, lots of men, young daughters swimming in t-shirts and leggings, and no adult women swimmers. Still nice to be immersed in water. Then I met up with Karthik to visit the Tirumalai Nayak Palace. I had been here on my own before, but this time Karthik was my guide, telling me some of the stories

behind the figures and sculptures on display. Parts of it are a bit neglected but it is nonetheless a stunning palace and reminds me of the arcades of Turin (I believe there is an Italian architect connection somewhere) - and it's also cooler than many other places at this time of day. Apparently, there are sometimes cultural events and concerts here in the evening and that must be an experience, to be enjoyed with plenty of insect repellent I'm told!

Then home by way of a coconut milk stall and I also sampled the famous jagarthanda, a very sweet ice cream drink and a speciality of Madurai.

My lesson continued with Sinbad this evening and there was more very active participation in pronunciation drill activities. We're maybe getting a bit too loud!

Thursday 26.07.18

Up at 5.00 to visit some more Jain caves at Keela Kujil Kudi outside Madurai with Elaa, Arun, Vindya, Vigg and Anand. Some beautiful carvings and sculptures about halfway up the rock. On the way back we stopped off at a fish market in Madurai – quite challenging on the nose and I was feeling a bit queasy anyway, so the visit was brief.

Friday 27.07.18

Felt better this morning, met with Elaa and started preparing for the interview skills workshop. This evening will be the last lesson with my class as there are various events over the next few days.

We worked on Sinbad and had a final hangman riot. I think the idea of working on a story book together has been worthwhile. Students met the target vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation repeatedly so were able to speak about the story and overcome some inhibitions. And basically, they have been great fun and an absolute joy to spend time with.

Friday 28.07.18

This morning I did some more prep for the workshop and then went for a fantastic lunch prepared by Elaa's mother at their home in Karumbalai. Mid-afternoon I met Arun, Karthik and Prof. Prabakar and we drove out past Cessi to the professor's "garden", a plot where he'd like to build a small cultural centre. It was a relief to escape the smog and noise of the city and this area is very green and luscious with lots of palm and mango trees.

Tonight, Madurai Seed performed their play at a theatre festival in a hostel for primary school children from villages outside Madurai. There was also a performance by a clown with a message about looking after the environment. Apparently, he has also dealt with many social and environmental issues including plastic pollution, a major problem here. Madurai Seed dancers also performed a traditional dance and tea and snacks were provided for all. Then Wassan led a final, excruciatingly loud dance with all the children joining in – crazy!

Madurai Seed seem to be active across the city, involved with a network of likeminded people, in various projects working for a better future for children from under-privileged backgrounds.

Sunday 30.07.18

This morning we held the interview skills workshop at Kaleidoscope. There was a good show of volunteers – admirable on their free day! Things were a bit quiet to start but the pace lifted as the workshop progressed, especially when it came to the role plays. My experience here has been that the "just talking" conversation approach favoured by Karthik is not the most productive, and that more structured activities generate more actual speaking. But that is my very European perspective.



Monday 31.07.18

This morning Elaa and Arun took me to a Vishnu temple carved into the base of Elephant Hill, outside Madurai. From there we joined the rest of Madurai Seed at a local school for another performance of the play. This school has relatively good infrastructure and a good reputation apparently.



After the performance, the children were treated to lunch at a small local restaurant. Then 17- yes 17 – of us piled into an auto-rickshaw and travelled homewards, dodging police. At various stages of the journey Anand, who was sharing the driver's seat, had to jump out and walk to avoid us being stopped and fined!

This evening I went to a talk at Kaleidoscope given by one of the people I met at the theatre festival on Friday. There were quite a few people from community, educational and social organisations. Elaa translated for me.

Tomorrow is my last day at school.

Tuesday 31.07.18

I spent the morning with Karthik visiting the temple of Goripalayam and a local coffee shop. I have thoroughly enjoyed my stops at various stalls for tea, coconut milk and a range of delicious snacks.

This afternoon I revisited the Gandhi museum. Within the grounds, and slightly to the left, I found the Madurai Government Museum. In front of the entrance are various ancient sculptures of Hindu deities, and towering over them, an enormous Godzilla – bizarre!



We had ice cream at school tonight and I was showered with tokens, rings, hair clips, art works, nail polish and thank-yous. I have felt incredibly welcome here and had such enjoyable, fun lessons with my class. I won't miss the smog and traffic noise of the city but already mulling over when I could come back.