FIELDTRIP
LAOS REPORT
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OUR TOUR
DRIVING DRIVING
I was ever so delighted when I heard the great news that there was still a free space in the car to Laos! Thus, I was able to join the fieldtrip with Pi Koy, Pi Gee, Pi Yee and Laura who was clever and got her seat a long time before. I knew this would have to be a fun trip with these guys! As the big day kept getting closer, I started to get a little nervous. The office kept telling us these horror stories that have happened to other volunteers such as one who had too much sticky rice and had to be brought to the hospital because he was constipated during the whole trip. Or other people who almost starved to death because the food was so terrible as they only got blood and intestines to eat. I was also running around trying to buy a cushion because apparently the roads are so super bumpy and you couldn’t go without one.

As the departure day came, I was standing ready to leave at six in the morning in front of the office. In my bag was a very, very smelly cushion that I bought by mistake and wasn’t sure I wanted to touch and a sack full of crackers, carrots and apples. My heart was jumping, probably more than the car did during the whole trip, and I couldn’t wait till we hit the road to Laos. As the car was finally packed and oh, so loaded, we were ready to start our journey.

After a few hours of driving and knowing we would be at the border soon, we stopped for some food and at Tesco’s to buy even more food, just in case.

We arrived in Paklay and had our first meeting with the Deputy Director of Education for the district and then went to visit the scholars at the boarding house. It was my first time to see anything like it in person. It was so interesting to see how the students live without their parents at such a young age. The boarding house was quite packed and so some students had to share a bed. It isn’t like in Switzerland where kids at boarding school have superiors taking care, people to do their washing and a cafeteria where they can have their meals. These kids are around 14 to 18 and manage it all alone. I was so touched to see how they all watch out for each other, cook on a small stone stove over a fire and wash their clothes in the river. It just makes you realise just how spoiled we are in the western world. The girls were so shy that we could barely talk to them and take pictures.
Pi gee!!

No stealing food from students!
The students are in charge for their own meals.
Day 2

« PLAY » TIME...

17th October 2012

The next day we had an early breakfast and went back to the school where the scholars were waiting for us, cleaning and dusting the hall where we were going to have our one day workshop about career opportunities for when they graduate from school. This is a very important lesson, which, in my opinion, the school should be doing with all their students so they get a wider perspective of how they can manage their futures. We started the morning with an icebreaker game where we played Chain Catching, which was hilarious. We never have thought that there would be so much screaming and laughing. But it was an ideal start to loosen everyone up and to get in touch with the students, who were ever so shy at the beginning. Laura and I were in charge of the games in between the different subjects which Pi Kay, Pi Gee and Pi Yee organised. We also made the students express their thoughts and hopes for the future by different activities and writing short essays.

By lunchtime the students were all open and crazy taking pictures of Laura and me. It was so much fun playing and communicating with them using gestures and sign language.

The teachers cooked us a lovely lunch and so we had our first local food including bamboo soup, papaya salad, sticky rice and, last but not least, chilli paste. It was delicious and so was our dinner: nothing like the horrible meals that people back in the office had talked about!

As the workshop ended and we were waiting for dinner, we all sat outside eating loads of longan fruit, singing songs and dancing. The girls showed us how to move to the traditional music that they were singing for us.

Saying good bye after dinner was so hard and I would have loved staying another day for some more games, dancing and singing.
Dance Baby

TO THIS POINT THEY STILL WERE SO SHY.

DANCE BABY DANCE!
Day 3

Shovel Please...

18th October 2012

We left early the next day for Huay Mod Som Primary School where we met Tha Wah and Bank. This is when the roads started to get really bumpy. Unfortunately I didn’t have my cushion anymore. I had to get rid of it: I couldn’t bear the smell anymore. But Gee is a soft driver and so it wasn’t bad at all. I had a great time up there. The boys were building a new playground and, whilst we were waiting, I grabbed a shovel and started helping them. The community is very grateful for the help of Child’s Dream and so the whole village comes and helps. We also bought some lovely picture books.

Next stop was Mod Som Secondary School. Here I got to experience a school building like I have never seen before. We were only at the beginning of our trip so, as time went on, I saw so many different kinds of buildings and ways to create a classroom. This secondary school is built from bamboo and dried grass. The irritating thing is that, when you are in your classroom, you can actually hear the teacher in the next room as well which is so bad for the students’ concentration. And once again we were invited for lunch: chicken soup, sticky rice and chilli paste...which I have to learn to make by myself as it is so tasty.

In general we went to view around three to six schools a day, so I will save you from reading through every single one of them and just talk about the highlights we experienced. There was a lot of driving in between. Sometimes the schools were close by direct distance, but still it would take us hours to get there because of the bad road conditions....and it wasn’t even rainy season! Just imagine what it would be like during the monsoon! Luckily, we had a huge truck with an excellent driver.
EVEN BANK WAS HELPING WHAT A TEAM WORK

PLAYGROUND INSPECTORS QUALITY CONTROL
Day 4... or shall I call it Coconut Day?

We visited five schools and building sites and at each one we got giant coconuts. At the beginning we thought this was a great deal as it is ever so healthy and tasty. But, after having four already, you can hardly manage to drink the fifth one as well. And somehow I kept getting the biggest ones. Why?

The first school that day, and the most crazy one, in my opinion, was Phathana Secondary School which has 885 students. They have a wide variety of buildings as some are stone built, some are made out of wood and some just have a roof, but no walls. The classrooms where packed full, had animals wandering in and out, toddlers running around and teachers with their babies strapped to their backs. The worst thing I found was the dirt and the smell: all quite shocking.

We ended our day at Na La Secondary School where 13 BE scholarship students signed contracts for Child’s Dream support. Na La is, compared to Phathana, a beautiful relaxed environment for students to focus on their studies. It was clean and well organised. The students had a nice garden where they planted fruit and vegetables. The boarding house was tidy and clean. Unfortunately the students can’t go home often because of the distance to their villages and transportation is too expensive. One boy was wearing trousers that were clearly too small for him, but he didn’t have any money to buy new ones. Most of the students have little jobs around the area, helping out farmers to get some pocket money to buy food, but they all looked healthy and happy.
To be honest:
they all look
the same to me...
Saturday was actually the only day we visited just one school. By the time we got there and back, there wouldn’t have been any time to do anything else. Kuang Kham Secondary School is high up in the mountains and we needed to get a local driver to take us, due to the fact that the road is extremely steep and bumpy and too difficult to drive. But once we got up there we had an excellent view over the forest. It was so, so pretty! The boarding houses, which were still under construction, but almost finished, were some of the nicest I have seen. That was is for the day, I think? No. Of course we were invited for Dinner. Silly me. With crazy good dessert. Some Bananas in Bananas with Bananas. Ah. And there was Coconutsauce and something else. Can’t remember. It just was too good. Writing this, makes me want to eat some now. Great.
Students boarding houses.
Sunday morning, after viewing the construction work of the Mai Nursery School, we were once again invited for breakfast. So far we literally had had an invitation for every breakfast, lunch and dinner. I loved it. We got to taste a lot of different local dishes and, as I mentioned before, the food was a delight. The only problem I had was at night time because of the large amount of MSG that they use in food...so I got a headache and it made me go to the toilet every hour. Other than that, I haven’t got any complains.

So Sunday started with a great breakfast and than we took off to see another construction site. The District Education Officer than invited us to his house to play boules, eat and drink, so we ended up drinking beer and whisky at 10 a.m! Oh, I had such a headache afterwards. They have a very different way of drinking together: one man goes around with a glass refilling it for each person, so when you got a glass of beer, you had to drink the whole thing in one go. They don’t accept “no” for an answer! Being in Laos, you can really feel that it used to be a French colony. They play boules, the décor has an Art Nouveau feel to it and, in some areas, you will also find tasty, crispy baguettes.
So much to the subject food.

I got addicted to sticky rice and chillipaste.
The second school we visited on Monday morning was a primary and nursery school in Ban Pang Mon. There was a little girl at the nursery freaking out when she saw us. She was running around screaming hysterically, «Run, run away from the white people». I think she thought we were ghosts. Her classmates didn’t pay any attention to her; instead they just were standing there staring at us. One girl felt really attached to me so she kept following me and loved it when I took her picture.

As we arrived at Panghaithe Jung Primary School, students came running out their classrooms and stood in front of me, waiting to have their picture taken. Spontaneously Laura and I made up some games and started running around the school field. One was called Catch the Farang, which was funny because we had all these little Lao kids running behind us. The other one we played was Knees, Shoulder, Heads and Toes. We all had a great time.
The kids enjoy going to school. Most of them take it serious and want to go to high school one day.

It is easier taking pictures of the younger ones they aren't so shy.
Day 8 we started by driving to Pak Pet Don Pung Secondary School. The school has grown fast and there are more and more children coming. The boarding house is full and some students even had to move into the kitchen or sleep on the floor. In general they weren’t organised very well. What I really didn’t understand was why the teachers had such a beautiful garden with fresh vegetables, but they wouldn’t help the students to do the same. Somehow I thought the atmosphere was weird, but I can’t really explain why or what it was; just a feeling. What was nice was to see that the teachers let a disabled boy join the class even though he doesn’t quite get it all.

As everything took a little longer there, we got invited for lunch, and I bit into a chilli thinking it was a green bean and my head nearly exploded. The teachers found this quite amusing, but seriously, there were many tears dripping down my very red head. Then we had to rush to the next place because we had an appointment. The roads were extremely muddy because it had rained the previous night. Unfortunately, we saw one car that didn’t make it through and got stuck. We tried to help them but even chaining their car to ours didn’t help. Laura and I felt bad leaving them so we gave them some water and biscuits. I know: it didn’t solve their problem, but at least they got some energy.

That day was our last and we finished our trip visiting Moksatu Lower Secondary School. Classes had already finished so the classrooms were empty, but we got a a good look at what the students were doing after school. Some girls were cooking; others were down by the river having a shower and getting drinking water and others were playing Ta-Kor in front of the school. Laura and I tried to play as well, but it was much harder than it looked so we decided that watching was more our thing; after all, we had just had 8 days of action…

We headed off, driving towards the boarder and checked in in a sweet little Guesthouse. The boarder closes early and so we weren’t able to cross over to Thailand that day.
This trip was one of the most amazing things I have done so far. Being able to joining Pi Koy, Pi Gee and Pi Yee in Laos made me understand so much about all the difficulties which appear whilst working with a country like this. You really get to see why and how important the work of Child's Dream is. It was an amazing experience, which I will never forget.
There are so many different ways to build a school.