

Volunteer Report – Kenneth Ong
KHUN MAE YOD SCHOOL, May – July 2012



Introduction

This was my first time volunteering and it was a wonderful experience. I have lived in Singapore all my life and had traveled to many countries for work, but to live in a school on a mountain was a definitely a first.

My main motivation for volunteering was that I have been fortunate all my life and I wanted to help others. Singapore has provided me with good education and comfortable living conditions, so much so that I often take things for granted. Living in the mountain school helped me to realize what is really important in our life is not a big car or successful career, but love and happiness.



Conditions

The school is located high up in the mountains and the nearest place where you can buy anything is about an hour's drive down an unpaved mountain road which gets quite dangerous after rain. The nearest town is Mae Chaem, about 3 hours' drive away, where I spent most of my weekends.

The school has electricity from the power grid which is stable most of the time, but I did encounter a few days of blackouts. There is broadband internet and it is very stable as long as there is electricity. The mobile signal is very weak and I was unable to get any signals on my phone. However, the other teachers were able to receive a signal on theirs but only near the school field.

Being high up in the mountains, the weather was cold most of the time, and with the strong winds, it can really get freezing, especially at night. It was the warmer rainy season while I was there, you could only imagine how cold it will get during the winter season. The roads are just soil and get muddy after rain, a good pair of boots is really necessary when helping out with the work in the school. For day to day wear, a pair of slippers is good enough as they are easy to remove when you go into the rooms. It is also easier to wash the mud off the slippers than off a pair of shoes.

There are lots of insects and a fierce “little monster” called *Khun* or *Kan* around the area. It is bigger than a mosquito and you will not feel it when it bites. But after it is done, you will scratch like mad and the bites swell up into big boils! However, they do not bite everyone and only “lucky” ones like me get it. I guess I was trying to be heroic and did not wear socks for the first few weeks, and I was bitten like crazy. When I had enough and started wearing socks and putting on insect repellent, the bites decreased significantly. Moral of the story? Don’t be a hero and put on your insect protection.



Students

The students were extremely shy when I first arrived and ran away from me whenever they saw me walking towards them. It took a few weeks before they were comfortable with me and started to interact with me. I tried to minimize the “scariness” by putting on a big smile and reaching out to them all the time. WARNING! Once they got used to playing with you, it can be overwhelming. Sometimes I had to literally push them out of the way as I was doing something. The boys love football while the girls love

volleyball, if you play either of them (which I don’t), you will be able to blend in quite fast.

Because of their limited command of English, sometimes they can appear to be “offensive”. For example, there is one boy from Prathom 4 (the front boy on the photo on the right), he will always shout at me “YOU YOU”. Although his intention was to call me, it sounded very rude and I was quite angry with him for some time. Respect is very important in Asian culture and a student in Thailand is to greet a teacher with respect and address me as “Kru Kenneth” which means “Teacher Kenneth” in English. It went on for some times before I was finally able to (through body language) get him to stop shouting and address me properly. And as fate turns out, he was really a very active and sweet little boy and brought plenty of joy to me during my stay.





I had great admiration for the students. They were very hard working and never complained of anything. There were many activities beside classroom lessons in the school, such as flower planting and renovation works and everyone helped during these activities. I had seen the girls in their school uniforms digging out soil from holes with their bare hands and carry soil around the school for flower planting. These are activities that we will never see in our “modern” society.

If you are planning to learn Thai language while staying in the school, please note that there is another local dialect which the students speak all the time. I was told it was quite different from Thai and since most of the teachers are from elsewhere, they do not speak it either.

Teaching

As I have no experience in teaching, I did not prepare anything before I went over and basically followed the English teacher around for the lessons. The English syllabus used in the Thai Education follows the American way, while I was schooled in the British way, so some adjustment was required. And the teaching was focused quite in-depth into the tenses and grammar and not so much on conversation in English. There is a lot of explanation by the English teacher in Thai to the students most of the time and I was “lost” most of the time.

The lessons are short, about an hour, and very flexible depending on the teacher. Sometimes we went into the classroom and just gave them some exercises to do and we were out of the classroom within 10 minutes. There are also times when the director of the school called for a meeting with the teachers and all lessons were be canceled. Compared to my education where the teacher tried to teach as much as possible, this is really a more relaxed approach to which I could not get used to.

I would advise future volunteers to prepare more materials on conversation English, to help the students speak in English. The English teacher has the official syllabus to teach during normal school lessons, so you might want to discuss with the school on having additional lessons to teach the students. I found a website that provides some materials that will be useful for potential volunteer English teachers <http://www.anglomaniacy.pl>. You are free to use the materials on the website but please read the terms and conditions.

Conclusion

Like I said in the beginning, it has been a wonderful experience of my life. Yes, the insects’ bites did dampen the mood a little at first, but to see how independent and strong the students are, it more than made up for all the little inconveniences I had to go through. The only regret that I had was not being more prepared for the teaching and contributed too little to the students’ English education.

I know deep in my heart I will be going back again and again to visit the school, the teachers and especially the students, for they are now the most beautiful memories in my life.

Advice

Go with an open mind and don't expect anything. The school is located remotely in the mountains but you do get chances to go to town during weekends where you can buy pretty much everything you need. Just pack enough for the first week, observe how the teachers dress during school and buy similar clothing in town during the weekend.

Prepare some teaching materials, e.g. worksheets and stories; the school has printers where you can print them for the students. The level of English is quite low in the school; even the oldest students could hardly have a conversation with you.

Bring photos of your country and some small souvenirs, the students live in the mountains and do not have many chances to travel. They will be very happy to have you share the life in your country, everything is new to them.

If you need more advice or just want to chat with a former volunteer, please do not hesitate to find me, Child's Dream will be able to give you my contact details. There are a lot more wonderful things that I have seen and felt during my stay there. I will be very happy to share what I have learnt with you. =)



*"If the locals can live there all their lives, there's no reason why you could not do so for a few months."
Kenneth Ong*