

Kolkata

Volunteering for Future Hope by Emily Hinchliffe

"Three months in India sounded daunting. Three months in Kolkata sounded even more daunting. As a current Architecture student I was desperate for a break from plans, sections and models so went from one extreme to the other and found myself heading to India and into the welcoming arms of Future Hope, a charity set up to support the many street children of Kolkata.

Kolkata is a wonderful city. It's not necessarily beautiful all the time, it's not always clean and quiet and it's definitely never predictable. However for me, most importantly, and perhaps most surprisingly, Kolkata was welcoming. Yes, you have to dodge a few motorbikes and watch out for some street dogs but my experience cemented that people from Kolkata are generally looking out for you. It only takes one local on the street to help haggle for a taxi fare and you start to feel welcomed into what is initially perceived as an intimidating place. Tourism in Kolkata is not as established as other areas in India. In fact the majority of westerners I met are there working and volunteering so tend to learn the lifestyle pretty sharpish. This means that exploiting a tourist is mostly a half-hearted attempt to put an outrageous price on something and then quickly not putting up much of a fight. When I told people of my plans to go to India, as a single female, most seemed excited but nervous for me. When I added my destination was Kolkata their nervousness turned to scared and their excitement turned to confusion. I couldn't be happier that I ignored this reaction.



Kolkata was and is an incredible city to visit. It's jam-packed filled with unexpected delights. College Street, where hundreds of small stores sell academic books to students. The Maidan, an expansive park in the middle of the city where cricket, horse racing and football goes on 24/7. The Howrah Bridge, speculated to be the busiest bridge in the world and an incredible piece of infrastructure. There are so many elements to Kolkata that you can truly get to know when you are there for a prolonged time.

Future Hope was introduced to me through Noble Caledonia's Charitable Trust connection to the charity. Having had experience of volunteering in schools in Uganda and Tanzania, I assumed this would be a similar experience. From rugby training with half of the Harlequin's Rugby team to cooking pancakes for 20 girls on a single ring stove, my time at Future Hope was exactly how India is, hectic, bizarre and most importantly fantastic.

Set up by former HSBC branch manager Tim Grandage, Future Hope has been working in Kolkata since the late eighties. The NGO works with street children providing an education and accommodation for over 200 children. With pupils attending the school from local bustees and the Future Hope homes, school life is genuinely an exciting and buzzing safe place. The homes for children who have been picked up off the streets are the real heart of the charity and the place I found the most inspiring to be. So much so that I have recently completed my university dissertation on the subject. The homes are split into boys and girls and age groups and are located within 20 minutes of the Rowland Road school site. There are currently seven homes for boarders, three for girls and four for boys. Children are allocated to the homes not by what school year they are in but rather their age or estimated age for children with no birth certificate. The boarders range from 6 to 21 years old with pupils who have left the school but are still being given support in order for them to apply for jobs and go to college.

This is a vital step in the children's development knowing they have a stepping stone after school graduation in which they are still being supported. There are opportunities across the homes that children can personally identify with, their own possessions, their own work and their own space. As a volunteer I would visit every day for dinner and games and helping with homework. Each and every child has their own back story, some of which are shared, most of which are not. All children are level and equal and take on responsibilities which gives them pride and a chance to settle in a home. Personally this was the most important part for me. It's where the children really find their place in the system.



As a volunteer for Future Hope, I had many opportunities and responsibilities. During school hours I worked with the younger years. Unexpectedly for everyone, including me, I taught science lessons to grade five, as a teacher left with 24 hours' notice just before my arrival. This was at some points challenging and equally as rewarding. Scratching up on my sedimentary rock process and bones of the body, my main focus was creating an interactive and interesting learning environment. I also experimented with bringing laptop presentations and carrying out investigations into different processes.

Similarly, the reading room at Future Hope is a brilliant place. The junior school sets out time for all years to have one-on-one English and Hindi reading lessons with volunteers and teachers. This is an invaluable resource for the children, who are given the opportunity to read out loud to an adult, something that for many is their only chance to do so. Obviously, I was only in the English reading room and, as well as helping the older children read long books and complete chapters, I also assisted with the kindergartens' phonics. This was personally a fantastic experience helping children as young as four work through letters into sounds into actions into words into sentence. Watching true progression is a wonderful thing.

Sport at Future Hope is vital to its success. Everybody takes an interest. From small girls' hockey sessions where you have to watch out for ankles, knuckles and everything in between to the Future Hope rugby team who compete in the most esteemed tournaments across the city. The former street children take on the sergeant's police team and win, regularly. There is an engrained sense of pride around these matches where the whole school turns out to watch. From the students, to the teachers, to the charities accountants. As a keen footballer myself, the girls' football team was where I focused my attention. They are good. A few are seriously good. I loved my training sessions on the Maidan, negotiating round lumps and bumps on the grass, and most importantly I loved packing on to the overfilled bus afterwards, everyone excited and invigorated by their love for sports.



It is the relationships that makes Future Hope a wonderful place to be. Having only touched on the surface for the three months I was welcomed into the lives of children who have every reason to be distrusted and independent. Most of the children I got to know are happy, educated and passionate. For the most part it is hard to imagine them before they came to Future Hope, when most of them were living on the streets or in the Railway Stations. It doesn't take long on a walk around the city to see the condition the children could have been in and the situation that so many are still. Future Hope is truly a special place to be and I am desperate to get back, if they'll have me."

For more details visit Future Hope website: [Future Hope](#)