



Working in a school in a remote mountain village in Sikkim, in northern India, was an inspiring experience for MARION ORCHISON. She shares with us the harsh realities of being an aid worker.

Sikkim... Travel Story



Photos by Marion Orchison

I am now out of Sikkim and back in Darjeeling. My permit is finished and I am living in limbo and hoping the police will let me back into Sikkim in a week. It was very difficult for the kids to grasp that I was coming back because three other volunteers were leaving for real.

Three weeks ago a cranky police official ordered me out of Sikkim because "I had been there too long" so I left. Sadly for him I subsequently made friends with the superintendent of police in Darjeeling (well, I met him twice and he smiled both times). Initially they were reluctant to give me a permit. But three days later the superintendent hauled some poor unsuspecting officer into his office and gave him a long lecture on giving the 'nice lady' what she wants without any more fuss. So that was fixed.

When I got back to Sikkim there were three new volunteers. Despite my initial fears, they turned out to be terrific company.

It is all go at the school. The year ten boys and sundry others have dug a ten by ten foot hole for the 50,000 litre rainwater tank and we hear the 'Government Grade' cement will arrive soon. I have trouble imagining that it is better than ordinary cement, but no doubt it comes with a silly seal to prove its authenticity.

The other senior boys have built garden beds using bamboo and rope, and with the addition of plastic, which should arrive on Sunday, we will soon have 100 fully functioning organic vegetable beds. Each senior student will tend to two, producing 2kg of vegies every two months, which is about their

consumption and thus of huge benefit to them and the school's budget. We are going to try mushroom farming too, and although I struggle to get past the fact that they call spores 'sperms', and always say it with a straight face, it should be a great project when it gets underway.

I am taking Class 6 grammar, (it is like beating your head against a brick wall -it feels very good when you stop) Class 9 English and then I have my angelic Class 8 for grammar in the morning and comprehension in the afternoon. The children in that class are a constant joy, and despite the fact that they cannot grasp sarcasm, I relish every moment with them. They are currently learning to write newspaper articles. We have been doing newspaper-article analysis for three weeks and they seem ready to invent stories themselves. In spite of being ridiculously busy I have had ample time to fall in love with the children once again. These kids are a daily joy to be around. There is a little boy called Tashi who gives me three or four letters a day telling me he "lives me" and although I am sure it is just that he can't spell 'love', I can't help thinking that "I live them" too.

Tacky though it sounds, working here I feel I know what having a full heart really means. I find myself smiling incessantly and constantly overjoyed just to be in their company, even when they are being naughty. There is just nothing hard about them, even the teenage boys are as soft as butter and their cheekiness is nothing but hysterically funny.

This time the monk has also found a new soft

spot for me and has put me in charge of far too many things to ever get done. I just hope he lives long enough to enjoy his new found good humour, but he is not well and drinks a lot.

Last week I went away. The trip was amazing but Jesus, never ask mountain people to show you around. It is very hard work. I think we have crippled both Lancho (one of the students) and his father. We were not aware that we had to take our things with us; we thought they would be left at the house but no, it all came with us but the guides refused to let us carry our bags. So they lugged our stuff plus our food up the mountain, well two mounts really. The walk to their house is a vertical 4km climb, followed by the same in excruciating reverse the next day, punctuated by stops at houses of kids from the school, to drink tea, be thanked for teaching their kids, given eggs and curd for the long trip and berated for not telling them we were coming so they could do it all properly. I am never telling anyone I am coming. God knows what they would try to feed me. Lancho's place is lovely and has a great view of the mountains. His youngest brother Sakchin is a monkey of the highest order.

We had to drink a lot of yak-butter tea; this makes the eggs and curd seem a good thing. However, after drinking enough of it, the salt tea seems fine. After getting back to the road on Wednesday (my poor knees) we went on a crazy jeep ride with Lancho's uncle, with Lancho, his dad and the brother of another student, Onchuk, who is terrific but speaks no English. Lancho is getting very good at translation.

The road was very steep and rocky and we had

to stop about 2km from the top because the rain had washed a big rock to the surface. The driver and his friend apparently slept in the car waiting for our return the next day. This would not have been fun for them. We then walked in the pouring rain for 14km, all up hill. It was less than fun. I looked at the scenery, it was green and very nice but we were very wet. When we reached the monastery at 5.30pm we were totally knackered. We slept in a hut with no glass in the windows and a fire that filled the room with eye-burning smoke. We then froze our arses off all night as it proceeded to snow, about 50mm. The books say that the monastery is only 8,000 feet but I want to check this because the locals said it was 11,000 feet and judging by the lack of oxygen I would tend to agree.

The other volunteers and I slept on a single bed with some blankets under us and our sleeping bags on top. The boys all froze on the floor. Lancho may never be the same again. In the morning we had an astounding view of the mountains. We were behind Kanchnjung, Pelling was in front of it and we were just below the snow line, truly amazing.

We then hiked up another 4km in the rain to some religious rocks and springs. The place is very sacred to Lepcha people and Buddhists alike and we were regaled with tales of its significance. There were yaks, big hairy things with bad tempers. At the top it was very hard to breath so we didn't stay long. It was also freezing and the guides kept insisting we get our heads wet under the blessed springs. I didn't feel blessed. It felt wet. We then hiked down the 14km to the car and insulted the Panchayat of a small village because we couldn't walk up the 100 ▶



steps to her house for tea. They brought tea down to us and I felt very bad but my legs were wrecked and I was so tired. The tea was salty; I think this was on purpose.

The ride back was typical, stops every five minutes to be given more tea by more parents, more eggs, and more food. It was a bad day to be a chicken. These people have no idea how weird it is to be fed 50 times a day while people watch you for signs of approval. They are all lovely and very grateful for the work we do at the school. It really was very special for me to finally get to meet them. I was thoroughly told off though by most, as they only found out I was coming that day and they didn't have time to feed me properly.

We got to Gantok at 10.30, just as the hotel was closing but it had nice warm beds and a shower. I am knackered today but quite proud we managed it. The locals said they were proud of us too as it is a very difficult walk and none of them thought we could do it. I'm glad they kept that to themselves before we went.

The much awaited third Great Vajra Guru Thundup has begun. It is a prayer festival attended by re-incarnate lamas and hefty elder women with plaits, prayer wheels and mean tempers. These women know how to hurt you if you come between them and their food. Last year they made a volunteer cry by elbowing her in the ribs and standing on her feet. The prayer (which I can recite for you later if I have to) has to be said 10 times. I think that this is 10 times 100,000, since I am not good at maths you need to work it out. It takes two weeks and it is bedlam from beginning to end. The monk promised me this year the kids would only have to pray for two days but the Rinpoche (high lama) requested their attendance, so they prayed sun up to sun down for the whole thing.

The festival meant school went to hell in a hand basket and I had a fight with an insane German hippy about the value of education versus whacking

seven year olds when they pray too fast. I felt I won the fight but it was only a moral victory because he is a hippy and in the end the seven year old still had to keep praying slowly.

My friend Tan and I are doing fine. My flu is gone and the bugs are biting her less than they were. We have shopped ourselves stupid on clothes and jewellery and have established a cottage industry in town making hats. The local women have taken to stealing my knitting from me and giving it back finished, so we have made a hell of a lot of them. Living in the village is a lot of fun and I feel a real sense of belonging this time because I know so many of the locals. Even the postal worker seems to hate me less this year.

We have had another outbreak of boils and conjunctivitis. These kids put up with more than anyone should have to, and what's more they do it silently, and show nothing but gratitude for the pathetic efforts we make to help them feel better. I found this week really very hard because I had asked one of the teachers at school to take care of the scabies. I stupidly assumed for a week that he had, only to find out he had not and I ended up having to take one of the kids to hospital because his genitals were so bad. I feel stupid and quite guilty for not checking, but I also had my hands full with after-school tutoring among other things. But now it is all organised and we are trying to deal with it day by day.

The best part of the exercise was Prakash. He is three and the young brother of two of the scabies cases. He came into the bathroom to find his brothers naked, cold and covered in sores and promptly burst into tears, so I was left holding the baby while his brothers laughed at how silly he was. Their ability to keep their sense of humour is astounding. Also, the scabies kids now follow me around, just checking I'm still here and making sure I don't run off. It is very touching. I have bought a lot of scabies soap and wash myself with it a lot. It is amazing how

looking at this stuff makes you itch.

I love these kids far more than I had imagined I could ever love someone else's children and I am dreading leaving. They ask almost daily how many days are left and at present it is unclear whether I will be able to extend my permit until June.

Class 7 are becoming my favourites and today they set out to wreck me good and proper. I set them the task of writing a poem or story about something they really miss. It began okay with a dead dog and unrequited love (they are 16) but went down the hill when it got to the boys I know quite well. First Lencho wrote about how his mother cries when he has to go to school. The parents live near the Chinese border in a very remote village and he almost never sees them, but he then went all out and wrote a page about how much he will miss me and that he wishes I wouldn't go. He lives in the same house as the volunteers so we spend a lot of time with him and he looked like he was going to cry, which just about killed me.

Sukusing wrote a quite amazing poem about his mother. She died a long time ago but not surprisingly, he is still struggling with the loss. He wouldn't show it to me in class but waited until the break and then gave it to me. He is a lovely boy. I talked to him for a bit and we both benefited from a good long hug, but honestly, what can you say to him? I have been talking to them a lot about how much they have given us while we are teaching them and that they are very special kids, but they are so sad.

Today I woke up at 6am for breakfast and things went pear-shaped from there. I work with a boy called Surej in the bakery. He is 19, very smart and works hard for no pay.

I spend most of my time with him and am sadly overprotective I guess. Anyway, I found him cowering in the kitchen this morning with bloody hands. It took ages to get him to admit what was wrong and he was badly shaken. It turns out he took the

monk's car to see his parents the night before and it slid off the road and hit a rock. He was not badly hurt which was very lucky, but he was utterly terrified of the monk. I have to admit I was very unsure of what the monk would do. When drunk he can be utterly beastly with the kids. So I waited below the stairs in case he took a swipe at Surej but in fact he was calm.

The monk said the car was old and that he would not press charges against Surej for it, but that he had to pay to have it fixed today. Of course this is impossible as Surej and his family are destitute. I know it was a stupid mistake on his part to take the car in the first place and try driving in the weather we have been having and that having to pay for it is the right punishment under normal circumstances. But this is not a normal situation, and it had the potential to wreck his whole life. So I paid for the car to be fixed. I am worried it was the wrong thing to do but at the time I couldn't come up with a better idea. I must sit him down and explain how serious it is. The monk is not pleased that I bailed him out but that is the least of my worries.

Surej is sick and embarrassed to have taken my money and is still terrified of what the monk will do. I told him he had been stupid and that although I was quite happy to help, he needs to grow up and learn from this.

It is so hard for these children, they get so little chance to be kids and make kid mistakes. But he also needs to accept that the other boys look up to him and that he could well have died if the car had skidded right off the cliff instead of left.

All in all things are going well, just hectic and emotional. I love these kids out of all proportion and I am so proud of them. They work harder than most of us ever will and never complain, and every year people walk away because it is too hard, so they slowly learn that they are not worth the effort. But they are, so I will be back next year, hopefully for 6 months.