

Burmese days

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GLEN HOME ORGANISATION: INEX-SDA, Czech Republic

INTERNSHIP NR.: 5000300623

INTERNSHIP TITLE: Supporting a community based education program

INTERNSHIP COUNTRY: Myanmar, Karen State, Hpa-An Township

PERIOD OF THE INTERNSHIP: 17/07/2016 – 14/10/2016

NAME OF THE HOSTING ORGANISATION: Educational Gathering Group (EGG)



Summary

English

An internship in which I participated in 2016 within the GLEN programme took place in Hpa-An - a town which lies in Karen State in Myanmar. I spent exactly three months there and with my tandem partner from Slovenia we worked at the local non-governmental academy EGG, where we taught mostly English, Social science and organised several workshops. We were already the third GLEN tandem coming to Hpa-An, so the project could be considered as established and successful one. That's why we didn't have to face any difficulties with cancellation of the project or a lack of the communication from the side of the host organisation.

The town of Hpa-An is the capital of Karen State and is surrounded by beautiful nature and paddy fields. Karen State itself is in a longterm conflict with the Burmese government and the political situation there is very unstable. Myanmar has been a very quickly changing country since the border opening and is becoming a new tourist destination. Hpa-An doesn't belong to the top tourist destination of Myanmar yet, however the number of travellers is increasing everyday.

Czech

Stáž, na kterou jsem se vydala v roce 2016 v rámci programu GLEN, proběhla ve městě Hpa-An, jež leží v Karenském státě v Myanmaru. Strávila jsem zde přesně tři měsíce a se svojí tandem partnerkou ze Slovinska jsme působily na místní nestátní akademii EGG, kde jsme učili převážně angličtinu, sociální vědy a vedly různé workshopy. Byly jsme již třetím GLENím tandemem, který se do Hpa-An vydal, projekt se tedy dá považovat za zavedený a úspěšný. Nemusely jsme tak čelit problémům se zrušením stáže, či nekomunikací ze strany přijímací organizace.

Město Hpa-An je hlavním městem Karenského státu, obklopené krásnou krajinou a rýžovými poli. Samotný Karenský stát je v dlouhodobém konfliktu s barmskou vládou a politická situace je zde velmi nestabilní. Myanmar je od doby otevření hranic velmi rychle měnící se zemí a stává se také novým turistickým cílem. Hpa-An sice zatím nepatří mezi nejvyhledávanější myanmarské turistické cíle, nicméně nárůst cestovatelů je zde každým dnem víc a víc vidět.



Motivation for the project and background of the participant

GLEN was something what had been in my mind for a very long time, but I never had time, possibilities or enough experiences yet to get courage and apply for the project. That changed when I was in my last year of university and I didn't have any exact plan for the future. At that time, I also met one former glennie. I took this meeting as a signal to finally apply. I applied only for educational projects, because that's the field where I felt some confidence and had previous experiences which could be beneficial to the organisation. I also considered the participation in this internship as a great opportunity to learn, experience life outside of our cultural sphere, share experiences, broaden my horizons, direct my life journey, deepen my knowledge and gain experience in non-formal education, get more experience with non-profit organisations and do something good and useful for society.

Host organisation and its work

EGG is a boarding non-governmental school in Hpa-An, Karen State, Myanmar. The school hosts 32 students, equally mixed boys and girls of different age (from 16 to 25 years) and with different experiences and different cultural, regional and religious backgrounds. It was founded by a few enlightened people from Hpa-An, who mostly had personal experience with education abroad and became teachers or supporters of this school. The EGG academy is part of a educational network with two other schools in Myanmar with similar curriculum and background. They cooperate together and they also sent their best students for a one month exchange to the other schools. All of these three schools are financed by foreign grants. EGG is a very unique place, where students are really open-minded and devoted to learn new things, they have big goals and life missions. Their teachers are all of great character and it is obvious that they love their job and take it as a significant part of their lives. Atmosphere of the whole community in EGG is something very special and it was a great opportunity to be part of it for a while.

The process of your internship, the co-operation with your contact person during the internship and your GLEN tandem partner

The internship itself was a great and very intense experience. The co-operation with the contact person had been going smoothly since the beginning on both sides of the host (EGG) and the sending organisation (INEX-SDA). The principal of EGG communicated with us since the first seminar, she helped us with all necessary documents and visas. She was supporting us also after our arrival, although she was in final phase of her pregnancy. Deputy principal who was in charge after the baby was born was also helping us. The thing my tandem partner and I would appreciate is spending more time with other teachers and school stuff. But we understand that they live their ordinary lives with family and busy schedule. On the other hand we couldn't say that they didn't help us when we needed.

I was also very lucky with my tandem partner. I knew that the moment we exchanged our first emails and I was sure when we first met at the seminar. And after the whole internship I have to say that I had been right. We have learned a lot from each other, spent nice time together, communicated openly and without conflicts and although we had to go through some tough moments (health issues, my accident, regular changes in the schedule,...) we overcame them without a problem. We had planned our flights together and then went through a quite difficult and long journey to our final destination. On our way back we separated at the Thai borders and then continued on different ways - I went back to Europe and my tandem partner stayed for another two months in Asia.



Everyday life

Life in Hpa-An was very slow - compared to my daily routine in the Czech republic. I could compare all responsibilities I had there during these three months to the responsibilities I usually have during one month (maybe less) in my ordinary life. Also the climate wasn't really supporting our activity - the weather was incredibly hot till 4 pm and then around 6 pm the sky turned dark. After that I didn't feel like going outside too much, street lights didn't work well and you could find very few of them just on the main roads. Anyway, local people are not used to have some nightlife there, they spend evenings at home with family and only people you meet outside are tourists or drinking men.

Our main activities consisted of teaching at school, preparation for lessons, talks, cycling to the school, eating in local restaurants, buying fruits at the market, doing yoga, watching movies, writing blog,...

But I used this state of "slowness" as an opportunity to be lazy and relax - with the prospect of my active life which was waiting for me after my arrival. Of course that from time to time I was fed up with doing nothing (especially in the last month when the schedule at school changed and we had less lessons to teach), but I have to say that now back in my busy life I miss this stillness a bit.



Our work

We worked in EGG as fully respected teachers - that was quite a new and unusual situation in the beginning for both of us. We had been both used to the opposite status - being students ourselves. And then we came and even teachers in EGG with many years of teaching experience were asking us for opinion and advices.

Our main task was to teach English classes and Social science classes. Irregularly we could also prepare workshops on any topics we wanted. That part of our teaching we loved the most because it was the most creative one - we held workshops on topics of stereotypes, tolerance, zero waste, we prepared a city game, cleaning action or shot a lip-dub video with the students. We also had movie nights on Friday evenings where we usually projected some documentary movies and then talked about them with the students. Sometimes we could join some school or cultural events which the students took part in - so we participated on the youth day, the wrist tying celebration, etc..

In the beginning we thought that we would also help in the community café Veranda with some propagation, updating fb page, web,... But in the end we didn't do much about it. Somehow it was caused by the busyness of the boss of Veranda, somehow because we didn't know how we could contribute and what would be welcomed.

Once we prepared a workshop for a weekend English school on political parties, policy and justice. And we also had a few English lessons at Youth learning centre. But we didn't like the concept of YLC too much, it didn't have any concrete curriculum and students were beginners in English, so it was quite hard for us to teach them anything as they didn't understand us and we didn't understand them.

Our living

As it's not allowed to hire an apartment for short stay, we had to stay in a guest house. We were accommodated in Galaxy motel as our previous GLEN colleagues in past years. It was a really good choice. Galaxy is in the middle of the city, just next to the market and near some local restaurants and other guest houses. It was about 15 minutes by bike to school (30 on foot). The owners are super nice and helpful, we felt like a part of the Galaxy family. They were the first help in any problematic situation we got in. We really felt welcomed and happy in this place. Although we got the same price as any

other tourist coming just for one night (I would try to bargain a bit if I knew it at the beginning), but for this price we got breakfast, cheap washing of clothes, cleaning of the room, sometimes free dinner by master chef Kim and some medicaments when we felt ill. The only disadvantage was the fact that we couldn't cook our own meals and we were always served (which doesn't go very well with the concept of GLEN). Nevertheless I would recommend a stay in Galaxy motel to anyone coming to Hpa-An! The motel has also a roof top terrace with a beautiful view on the whole town and its dominant - Mt. Zwegabin.



Problems, challenges and solutions

The biggest personal challenge for me was to overcome a motorbike accident I had. It happened on one of our trip out of the town when a motorbike out of nowhere hit me from the backside - on an empty street while we were walking along the road. Although I was super lucky and nothing serious happened to me, I had to spend one day in hospital (which was quite an intense experience) and I still have to deal with some consequences even more than a half a year after the accident. It was something what I really didn't expect to happen to me during this internship and I had a really hard time

after it. I even considered to finish the internship earlier because it was quite difficult to live normal daily life in Hpa-an afterwards. I was super afraid of all vehicles on the road and of getting injured or ill in general again after I have experienced the medical care in hospital. Anyway, I am happy that I stayed till the end of internship, although this experience wasn't pleasant at all and had somehow a negative impact on the impression I got from these 3 months. It made me stronger on the other hand. I would recommend for all future interns to keep the danger of traffic accidents in mind - of course the same could happen everywhere and I don't even think that the probability is higher there but something I know for sure is that you don't want to come across the medical care there - especially in case of serious injuries.

Results, learning effects and experiences

Whole GLEN cycle had and still have a huge effect on my thinking about things which has changed a lot during this past year. It was an eyes-opening chapter of my life which affected my perception of the world very much. I am speaking especially about the seminars before the internship which helped me in perceiving people, situations and different habits, which I encountered during the internship, in the "correct" way. I have to say that I still didn't reflect my internship much. At least not intentionally. Somehow I didn't want to go back to it, somehow I didn't have much time to think (right after my arrival I started to study for my final exams and I also got a new job, so I was immediately back in fast life). I think I tried to reflect it during (by writing blog) and after it finished I didn't want to stuck in.

Conclusion & perspective

I am very happy that I got a chance to be a part of this amazing year. Although it had its ups and downs, it was a positive and enriching life experience in the end. It formed my personality, helped me to find my life mission and professional goals. I think I will benefit from it for the rest of my life.