

Paul Cooper's first report

Having spent one month in Sri Lanka, I can say only that I have greatly enjoyed my experience. S. Thomas' Gurutalawa could not be a more perfect environment to acclimatise to the weather, food and culture of the country. I find its climate ideally suited, as it is easy enough to bask in the sun, while seldom reaching uncomfortable temperatures. It is even cold at times! The food is sourced from the school farm, which means everything is exceedingly fresh. I have never tasted such good eggs, for instance, and many of the vegetables are extremely flavoursome. It's also gratifying to speak to the workers in the fields outside our quarters, and watch the crops get greener every day. The school horseshoes around a shallow valley, and is filled with greenery, fruit and flowering trees. This is a beautiful place, and I could not recommend it enough.

From the day we arrived the staff at S. Thomas' have consistently gone over and above the call of duty in ensuring that we are comfortable and catered for, whether it is letting us into the IT room to use Skype, providing us with mosquito nets, introducing us to a whole variety of Lankan fruits, or simply lending us a tea strainer, our lives here would be much harder without their constant kindness. We have been met with a level of friendliness and generosity that I could not have expected, even to the extent of being given a free three-wheeler ride by a stranger when we found ourselves stranded. The Sinhalese are delighted when they discover that I am learning the language. We have also been enthusiastically encouraged to join the students on school trips, which double as a good way of building our relationship with them, while also allowing us to see the country without incurring the prices normally inflicted upon tourists. So far we have been to Kandy and Peradeniya, as well as journeying down to Mount Lavinia in Colombo to watch the Royal-Thomian match with the cricket team. There is a trip to Singharaja national park planned next month, which promises to be something special!

Our actual duties as teachers have encompassed a pleasant variety. More or less concurrent with our arrival one of the senior English teachers was taken ill, and his wife, herself an upper-school English teacher, stayed with him while he recuperated. It seems we could not have arrived at a better time! Sam and I each covered one of their timetables, and while this promised a hectic and high-pressure introduction to the teaching regimen, the exceptional nature of the situation rendered all understandable. We have broadly been used as relief teachers throughout our first month, providing school-wide 'special English lessons' whenever a teacher is absent, which seems to be reliably often. I have certainly not had an empty day since we have begun, and I am sure Sam will tell you the same – it is good to feel we are being used to our full potential. While there was earlier talk of extra-curricular English lessons, these have not yet

materialised. Nevertheless, we have been kept very busy, and have experienced teaching at both ends of the school, from the lowest nursery level to grade 11 English literature classes. Each level provides its own challenges, but so far this variety has been most rewarding. We have made some good friends here in the school, many of whom have offered me accommodation on my coming journey around the country, and with whom I wish to retain contact after I leave. There is not a person in the school, from field-worker or security guard right up to the headmaster, who will not stop and talk or at least give a smile when you pass. We have also made friends with the stablemaster, and have helped to welcome the newest member of the S. Thomas family – a newborn foal – into the world.

I have enjoyed playing football with the students, and cricket with the teachers, though I have done so in an informal capacity. I have enlisted Sinhala teachers among the staff, and have reciprocated by speaking English with them – I have even been initiated into the basics of Tamil by some of the other masters. This has been a most rewarding experience, and being able to express myself basically in the language means that making friends is very easy. While the students can be boisterous and at times cheeky, I have never yet received any real disrespect from them, and my opinion of them remains extremely high. They have consistently demonstrated their honesty and discipline, and have in general been as supportive and accepting as the staff. While there are many who struggle with English, and experience no little frustration during the lesson, there are many whose spoken level is excellent, and there are few issues surrounding behaviour.

By way of summary, working in S. Thomas' has been an experience that I would recommend to anyone with a sincere interest in getting to know the amazing country that is Sri Lanka. In this case it is true that it is the teacher who comes away having learnt the most – this first month has been a fantastic inauguration into the culture, and as a means of gauging the character and diverse nature of a people, as a means of seeing the country and frankly spending very little in the process, I would urge others to take advantage of this opportunity.

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