

## **Sam Geeson's first report – 20 March 2012**

### **Application**

After completing my 120 TEFL qualification, I applied to S.P.I.C.E., hoping it would give me the opportunity to put into practice what I learned on my course. Furthermore, I hoped any placement I secured would allow me to travel around Sri Lanka, so I would be able to see as much of this incredible island as possible. Within one day of my application, Mohan interviewed me and offered me a placement at St Thomas College Gurutalawa. He was also instrumental in helping me sort out my flights, visa and a place to stay in Colombo for when I arrived!

### **Preparation**

After sorting my flights and visa, I purchased the TEFL teacher's pack from their website (the teachers pack has proved especially useful as it gives some great links to very helpful websites). I also invested in some traditional teacher supplies to take with me (these are not essential as all you need will be provided) as well as making sure I had suitable clothing for a school environment. However, during my preparation, I made the HUGE oversight of not learning enough of Sinhala. Although knowing common phrases like 'hello,' 'please,' 'thank you,' etc. are extremely useful, it is not enough to bridge the language barrier in some of the classes involving younger and lower ability groups. I would HIGHLY recommend that anyone who accepts a S.P.I.C.E. placement in Sri Lanka makes an effort to learn some common classroom phrases and other useful verbs before travelling to Sri Lanka. This will also help if you decide to travel around the country during or after your placement. Paul, another TEFL teacher on a S.P.I.C.E placement, brought and studied the Lonely Planet pocket guide to Sinhala and studied it about 2 weeks before coming and has also found it extremely useful while he has been here. One final piece of advice would be to bring mosquito repellent as there are lots of them knocking around and although the school will provide a net if you ask, you will still get bitten in the evenings if you are not careful.

### **Arrival and Colombo**

Once we arrived in Colombo, the first thing Paul and I did after getting through customs was to exchange our currency for Sri Lankan Rupees. We then met up with Mohan's Brother, Ranil who helped us buy a dongle and a Sri Lankan sim card. This has enabled us to have access to the internet throughout our stay in Sri Lanka. Please make sure you get a Dialogue sim card, as although Mobitel offers a better choice of packages their coverage in hill country can be very poor. After this we were driven to the hostel where we would be staying for the weekend before travelling to Gurutalawa on Sunday morning. Here, we were greeted by the friendly hosts of the guesthouse, who had prepared a very nice evening meal for us. Later that night through a mixture of charades, Paul's Sinhala and what English they knew, we taught and played various different cards until half past ten at night when we were forced to turn out the lights and go to bed.

In the morning we tried to go to the British Embassy but found it shuts on Friday, Saturdays and Sundays so instead took a gentle stroll up to independence monument and saw an art class sitting on the steps drawing it. We also visited the museum, which goes through over 600 years of Sri Lanka history as well as having sculptures of all their independence heroes. We returned to the guesthouse for lunch and were treated to a tour of Colombo by Ranil.

The next day followed a similar pattern, in the morning, Wasana, the daughter of the couple looking after the guest house, treated us by taking us to the dog show next door to our hostel. We had lunch at the guesthouse and strolled around independence monument in the evening before having a game of cards before we went to bed.

Before we departed to Gurutalawa we were lucky enough to be invited to see the church service at sacred heart church in Colombo. This was an experience like no other with people turning up when they could and leaving when they had to. It was so busy many people had to stand outside in the hot sun to listen to the Sinhala service, as there was not enough space in the church. It seemed so much more inclusive than any religious service I had ever been to before and I am truly grateful to Wasana and her sister for allowing us to join them.

### **The School and on site Accommodation**

When we arrived back at the guesthouse, Rev. Nihal Fernando, the head master of STC Gurutalawa, was already there to meet us and we promptly set off for the hill country enjoying the fantastic views and some incredible food along the way. When we finally arrived in Gurutalawa I was astonished. I have honestly never seen a school with more picturesque surroundings. The school itself is like a university campus with the middle school and upper school at one side of the site, the office dining hall, library and sports shop in the middle and cable section at the other side. We were shown to our accommodation, which was one of the nicest on site apartments in the school and was incredibly spacious.

The school's structure is very similar to that of an English secondary school with grades 9,10 and 11 taught in the upper school and grades 6,7 and 8 taught in the middle. The Cable section is like an English primary school for grades 1,2,3,4 and 5. In each grade there are three classes: an English medium class, where classes are held in English; a Sinhala medium class, where classes are held in Sinhala and Tamil medium where, you've guessed it, classes are held in Tamil. Don't worry though, both Sinhala and Tamil medium English classes are conducted in English!

### **Sports Week**

During the first week, the school held its sports meet, which is similar but far more impressive than a traditional English sports day. Unfortunately, this meant there were no classes because the students were busy preparing for their individual events or practicing for the visual display to be put on for the parents, headmasters and old boys (students who have left the school but are

still affiliated with it). However, this time still proved to be very useful as we were able to familiarize ourselves with the surrounding environment, introduce ourselves to some of the teaching staff at the college and meet some of the students we would be teaching!

On the big day we sat and watched students compete in the various events, cheering on our adopted house, Read. We even competed in the teacher tug of war! I said at the start, this was far more impressive than a traditional English sports day.

### **Mid Term and Galle**

After Sports week it was the schools mid term and we had the opportunity to catch our breath, but only for a day! We relaxed and enjoyed the scenery before catching the night bus to Galle. This was a unique experience to say the least and was very different from my previous experience of the buses in Sri Lanka. Let me explain most of the buses in Sri Lanka are old and uncomfortable, especially if you are travelling for long periods of time. Add to that the uneven roads, general driving too fast around tight bends, loud music blaring through the speakers and the fact that buses are incredibly busy, then you can start imagine what our overnight bus ride was like!

When we finally arrived in Galle, we checked into our pre booked guesthouse, 37 Rampart view. This was extremely well equipped, had free Wi-Fi, was in a prime location next to the fort and because Paul and I shared a room, it cost us 1500 SLR a night which works out at less than £10! At Galle we went shopping and managed to get buy some extra essentials like a kettle for our apartment, more suntan lotion and some after sun. We spent the rest of the time relaxing around the beautiful fort area where were even given an impromptu tour of the area from a local, which ended up costing 200 SLR. In the evening we relaxed on the beach and I created lesson plans for my first week. I was unreasonably proud of one lesson called 'Sam and Paul go to Galle,' in which I hoped to teach the meanings of 'could' and 'should,' in the end I didn't even get to use it! Although, Paul said it went rather well when he covered the meaning with his class.

On the way back we got a highway bus to Colombo, which was a coach really, and was a lot more comfortable than the packed buses on the way down. We then took the train from Colombo to Bandaralawela. Trains in Sri Lanka are generally a lot slower than buses. On the other hand the journeys are a lot more relaxing and comfortable. The train we caught had especially spectacular views, which really were something quite special! After the train, we managed to get back to St Thomas College safely apart from a minor hitch in Welimada where we were given a free three-wheeler drive back to the college.

### **Teaching**

Unfortunately, during the first week of teaching, the school's two most experienced teachers were absent. Mr. Fernando had fallen very ill and his

wife Mrs. Fernando had gone home to take care of him. This led to us being thrown in at the deep end a bit. Paul and I were given the textbooks and told to cover their lessons. Looking back on it, I cringe at how bad my first two lessons went with me being really nervous and not totally sure what I was meant to do! However, as the week progressed, I gradually got to feel more and more confident and my lessons went a lot better. In second week Mrs. Fernando returned and her guidance helped me feel a lot more at ease. For these two weeks I conducted mainly textbook lessons so the students would not fall behind on their syllabus. Generally these lessons involved:

- Reading from the text book to start the lesson
- Dividing the class into teams and awarding points for the correct answers on the passage to test their comprehension
- Asking students to do an exercise from the text book
- Followed by a game to finish the lesson

After the second week Mr. Fernando was well enough to start teaching again and as such my role changed to that of a relief teacher. As a relief teacher I filled in for absent members of staff and instead of covering their normal subject, I was instructed to do English speaking lessons. During these lessons I picked a topic the class had already covered on their syllabus and did a 'PPP' lesson like the ones I submitted in my TEFL assignments. Activities I had particular success with in these types of classes include:

- Hot seat (for advanced classes)
- Hangman
- The nought's and crosses game shown on the video course
- Simon says (for younger classes)
- Teddy throw (again for younger classes)
- Role play (ONLY with the 11A English medium class)
- Playing a song through my laptop and conducting a listening lesson (small classes only, it really didn't succeed with classes of 10+, however, if you take speakers I'm sure it would)

After the third week, news of the games had spread very quickly and often when walking into a class I would hear "games sir?" To get around this I usually replied "First English - then games". This helped ensure that students were well behaved during the earlier parts of lessons.

### **The Staff and the Students**

**Students:** As the S.P.I.C.E. programme placed me at a boarding school, I was able to give students the valuable opportunity to practice their English outside the classroom as well inside it. However, during the first weeks of my placement, the children in the school were generally fairly reluctant to speak to me in English in their own time. As time passed and students grew more comfortable and accustomed to our presence in the school, even the students who struggled with English have come up to me striking up conversations and inviting us to join in with their football, rugby and cricket matches.

In school hours, students are generally extremely well behaved. However, lower down the school they can get carried away and be quite noisy during any games or competitions. If you think you have a free period though – beware, sometimes when a teacher does not come to a lesson, students often come to the staff room dragging you away repeating the words, “Relief, relief” even if you are not the one who is meant to be on cover! You have no idea, until you have experienced it, how nice and frustrating it is to be wanted but lose one of your coveted free periods.

**Staff:** All the staff are exceptionally welcoming and friendly and try to make you feel at home as well as helping you adapt to an unfamiliar environment. During our stay here we have been invited to the teacher’s daily cricket match. We have been invited back to a teacher’s personal home where we showered underneath a waterfall, we have been taken to Welimada to get new phones and been treated to huge volumes of tea from our next door neighbors. I cannot finish this section without saying a special thank you to Nuan, Rajeev, Amila, Samjivika, Crystal, Aloma and Nirupa for all the help given and kindness they have shown. Thank-you also to headmaster Father Fernando, and the sectional heads, for allowing me to teach in their establishment.

### **School Trip to Temples**

During the weekend of our third week the Tamil society allowed us to accompany them on our their school trip to three Buddhist temples, one of which was the Lankatilaka temple, and Kandy botanical gardens. We set off at four am in the morning and I can only describe our bus journey as a hybrid between an actual bus journey and a school disco with loud music and dancing happening throughout the majority of the it! The temples themselves were incredibly interesting with many statues of the Buddha and some amazing artwork inside. I do not think I can do them justice by describing them, so for all who wish to see them, you will have to go and visit them yourselves!

### **Poya Day**

Every full moon STC Gurutalawa gets a day off! On ours we accompanied the children going to a Buddhist temple. Here we sat in, on what appeared to be a holy reading and got blessed by a Buddhist monk who tied a piece of string around our wrists, which I believe is to protect you from evil.

### **Cricket Match**

On the final weekend of our first month, Mohan and Father Fernando kindly arranged for us to go and watch Royal College Vs. St Thomas Mount Lavina cricket match, which is apparently the oldest running cricket series apart from ‘The Ashes’. We took an overnight train from Bandarawela to Colombo, quickly dropped our stuff at the St Thomas Mount Lavina school, had breakfast and made our way to the stadium to see ‘The Big Match’. Here we

sat with St. Thomas schools old boys, enjoying the electric atmosphere, drinking beer and a local spirit, which is deceptively strong. At the end of the day's play, we made our way back to the school and enjoyed our evening meal. After, we went to the beach and enjoyed swimming in the sea at night! Unfortunately, we were not able to go very far out due to the strong currents and the fact that it was dark but it was an enjoyable experience nonetheless. The next day followed the same pattern before catching the night train back to Gurutalawa and I could not think of a better way of celebrating being in Sri Lanka for a whole month!