

Sam Kingscott: Interim Report - March 1st 2013

Kit and I arrived in Sri Lanka on Saturday, 19th January. When we landed in Colombo it was 30 Celsius which came as quite a shock considering it was snowing when we took off from Heathrow. Immediately, the hospitable nature of the Sri Lankan people became evident to us as we were greeted by Mohan Samarasinhes wife Celine, who took us to their flat in Colombo to rest, eat and drink. Following this short stay the Headmaster of S Thomas College, Father Nihal Fernando, picked us up from the Samarasinhe residence and we travelled to the Hill Country, where the College is situated. I spent the first day acclimatising to my surroundings. The school campus which boasts a farm, a chapel, a swimming pool and stables with horses in, makes S Thomas a truly idyllic place.

The following day, I began teaching. My role in the College is covering lessons in which the teacher is not present; therefore I am effectively a substitute teacher. During my first week of teaching, I learnt many lessons in conducting my classes. However, once I had established with myself what worked and what didn't, I have been and will continue to teach successfully, knowing that I am contributing positively to the children's all around education.

With English being my first language, I teach English during the periods that I am covering so that the children can take full advantage of my presence and develop their own English skills. I focus particularly on their spoken and written English by verbally teaching them vocabulary and grammar. I then back this initial stage of learning by giving the students writing tasks based on what I have verbally communicated to them, in order to compound their knowledge. Every morning I receive a timetable stating which classes I will be covering. Due to the unpredictable nature of my working days, I have to adapt my lesson plans as I do not know what grades and classes I will be teaching until the morning of any given day. On the one hand, this is a very challenging task as I have high standards to maintain within the College with regards to the quality of teaching. On the other hand, conducting lessons effectively, resulting in the children coming away from lessons having developed their English skills is both fulfilling and rewarding.

On the whole, the children at the College are very respectful of their seniors and participate with enthusiasm in class, making my job a pleasure. Inevitably there are disruptions in class. However, the sound values the children gain at the College means that children who do behave out of order do repent for their actions which is key in the other staff and I maintaining good relations with all the students. The keenest students asked me whether I would conduct extra English classes which I was happy to agree to; as such thirst for knowledge cannot be suppressed. Personally, it is not extra work for me because as I said previously, there is much fulfilment to be gained knowing the children are developing their English skills.

Overall, the staff and pupils within the school are good natured contributing to a healthy school environment. The work ethic and discipline inside and outside of the classroom of the pupils is on the whole is first-rate. I will state however, the students need to develop academic interests and not focus solely on their textbook work. General Studies classes are given but still this is not suffice in my opinion. Voluntary interest in subjects not taught in the classroom is integral to a student gaining an all round education and actually performing better in examinations. I have spoken to the Headmaster regarding this and he has informed me he is well aware of this issue and that it is one of many matters he wishes to address.

Outside of the classroom, a great deal happens within the school. The students are keen on sport and sport takes precedence in the first term. For the first few weeks of term the focus was practicing for the 'Sports Meet'. This involved the students going to the grounds every day after lessons had finished and practicing their events. I joined the children on numerous occasions and aided them in their practices; for example teaching them how to correctly throw a Shot Putt. On the 14 February, the school Sports Day took place. Having rained for days previously, the ground underfoot was waterlogged but the strong Thomian spirit instilled within the staff and students meant such an event went ahead regardless! The 'Sports Meet' as they call it was quite an occasion. As it is held prior to the midterm break, the majority of parents attended the event. A horse display and marching display are just two spectacles that added to the occasion. The students were driven by house passion, and many athletic events took place throughout the day, finishing with the tug of war event which wrapped up a wonderful day for all involved. Although the sports meet was a success, more could be done to improve the structure of sports lessons based on what I have seen, as currently, there are no coaches for any sport other than cricket and horse riding. Not only would this improve the standard to sport in the school, but it would also mean the students would enjoy their sports lessons even more than they already do, as implementing organised practices develop their skills in their chosen sports and they would gain a sense of achievement as a result.

Aside from sport, attention is given to the arts. For example, one day I stumbled upon a music lesson in which the children were watching the 'Sound of Music'. The children were clearly enjoying and I joined in watching it with them. The school library is also a great resource, containing much literature and a supply of daily newspapers which the children read during their free periods. Dance and theatre is also included in the syllabus, but I am yet to see any performances of these arts within the school as sport takes priority in the first term.

I have maintained good relationships within the school with other staff. The staff are good natured and are always willing to help, which was particularly useful early on in during my stay. Not only are the teachers pleasant and easy to work with, but the other staff on site from the Kitchen staff, to the maintenance staff, have assisted me

in various ways. For example, something I have developed a love for is 'Milk Tea'; a sugary, milky, black tea concoction, which appeared sacrilegious to a tea purest like me when I first tasted it. The rapport I have developed with the kitchen staff means I can source such drink at any time of day, and enjoy it whilst discussing with the staff what they are preparing for dinner. Sambath the librarian who I have also developed a good friendship with is also responsible for coaching the horse riders. I do him favours in that I sometimes look after for the library for him and one day he returned the favour. I told him I had never ridden a horse before and due to his good nature, he gave the opportunity to do so. Participating in such activities such as this is just one example of the ways in which I have involved myself with the staff outside school hours.

It must be noted that not all the time I have spent here has been in the Hill Country. During long weekends and the midterm break, I have travelled to various places such as Colombo, Kandy and Kalutara. During our travels, the accommodating nature of Sri Lankan people has been evident, as various characters have aided us in terms of our travelling and our accommodation. For example, Rajeev, a fellow teacher invited Kit and I to his parents house in Kalutara for the midterm break. Their hospitality made the break most enjoyable and their expertise in terms of where to visit in the area proved invaluable. His mother's cooking was a particular highlight. It must be noted, that the worst thing about Sri Lanka is travelling. Their road infrastructure is poor and their trains are very slow. However, upon arriving in the places I have travelled, the slow, uncomfortable journeys have been worth it; I look forward to much more travelling around this diverse Island before I leave.

As for Father Nihal Fernando, he has done his best to make mine and Kit's time in the school as pleasant as possible. He has granted me many favours such as organising accommodation for Kit and me on our trip to Colombo. The kind heartedness of the Father is perhaps overlooked by the students as he must maintain an authoritative presence; however the fellow staff and I recognise his many qualities and his immense contribution to School life.

As stated, the people I have encountered have aided in making my visit so far as enjoyable as possible. Both in school and outside of school, the generosity of the Sri Lankan people has proved significant in what has been overall, a wondrous experience up to this point.

