

INTRODUCTION

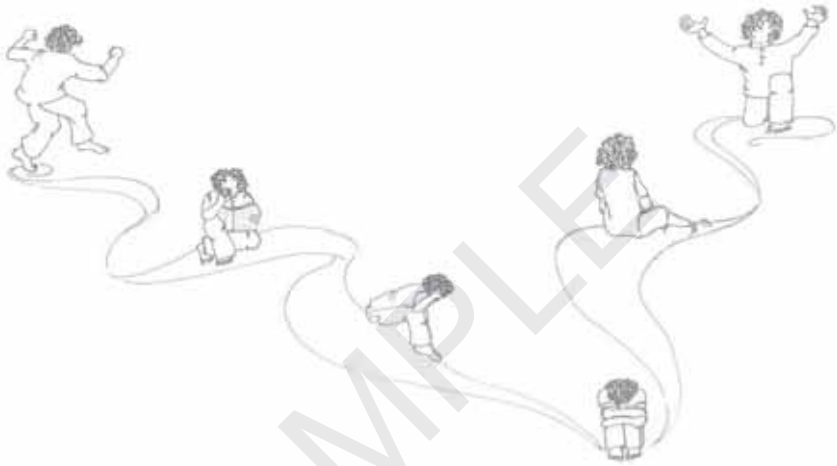


Illustration © Karen Thomas, 2003

Only volunteers, like the people in this book, know what it's like to uproot yourself from your own life, culture, everyone you have ever met, and everything that gives your life any meaning. Because of some (perhaps half-baked) notion of 'helping people' or 'doing something more with your life', you throw caution to the wind and take leave of your senses.

In your voluntary placement, you suddenly find yourself in the middle of a new way of life. You will most probably live in a country of extremes, live as an 'insider', but always feel like an outsider. By the time you return, you will be a changed person in one way or another. You may feel you have achieved something and made the world a slightly better place, although volunteers often find themselves believing they have gained more than they have given from their experience.

Volunteering abroad is a roller-coaster of the most extreme emotions and intense experiences. Many volunteers return to the life they left behind to find it changed beyond all recognition – because their perception is totally altered and their 'recognition' culturally skewed. Many volunteers decide to change the course of their life by going to college instead of returning to work,

volunteering again in a another country or doing something else they would not have considered before. The volunteer's emotional experience seems to follow this general pattern. Not everyone goes through all these stages, but most people experience most of them, more or less in this order:

- Excitement and initial curiosity. Wow, everything here is so different. Everyone here is so interesting!
- Altruism and determination, wanting to do something positive and beneficial, working and living in a co-operative way. Trying not to make a fool of yourself by saying or doing culturally inappropriate things.
- Horror and sadness – the people you work with endure such hard lives. There are such extremes of wealth and poverty in this country. The problems are immense. I don't think I can do anything to help.
- Depression and despair. What on earth am I doing here? Why is life so difficult? I'm just going to give it all up and go home.
- Humility. We are so spoilt back home, we don't appreciate what we've got. The humour and survival spirit of my new colleagues and neighbours is amazing.
- Lack of expectations and support. Nobody was expecting me! Nobody tells me what to do. The job will be what I make it.
- Irritation. Haven't these people ever seen a foreigner before? Why do they all keep staring? Leave me alone! What do they want?
- Learning about 'development'. There is a whole development and aid 'industry' in developing countries. Thousands of 'experts' are trying to eradicate poverty, corruption and illness. These experts all live in big, secure houses, drive good cars and have private medical cover.
- Having settled in, boredom of everyday mundane life. I feel so alone. I've only got acquaintances, no friends.
- Exasperation. Am I the only one doing any work around here? Nothing here makes sense. I don't think I can stand much more of this.
- Contentment, being accustomed to a new normality. I'm used to life here now – this is how things are done. I understand new ways of thinking and a different form of society. Feeling sure enough about yourself to be different from the people you've got to know, in ways that suit you.
- Return of your sense of humour. Life here is completely absurd . . . but then my life at home was also absurd.
- Relaxing and taking it easy. Enjoying life to the full, travelling and making new friends.
- Embarrassment at having gained so much and given so little. Oh no, it can't be time to leave already – I haven't done anything yet. I don't feel like I've contributed anything.
- Humility at people's gratitude and appreciation for your efforts and endeavours. Being incredibly grateful to your close friends for their companionship and help. Feeling guilty that you'll be going 'home' to a comfortable lifestyle while they continue to face minor irritations and matters of life and death.

- Making decisions about what to do after your time as a volunteer abroad ends. Realising that you may have changed considerably since you left home. Excitement at going home mixed with nervousness.
- Depression or hilarity on your return 'home'. The shock of the 'new' – what should be familiar seems strange. Your own culture, your own friends and family don't make sense. Their way of life seems bizarre, their priorities wrong.
- Calmness, realisation that you did not change the world but you made a small difference. Your time as a volunteer abroad was worthwhile.
- Nobody understands me properly. Nobody is interested in what I did as a volunteer. The only people who know what I'm talking about are other volunteers. I'm going to write a book based on my time abroad. . . .

So here it is . . . an anthology of around seventy contributions on what the volunteering abroad experience is really like: from setting out, working and living in a different culture, to coming 'home'. These contributions are from people from various nationalities, volunteering through a number of agencies or independently, in a range of countries from Canada to Zambia (the host country is next to the author's name). This anthology is the result of an effort which took two years in the making on a shoestring budget, but one we were determined to achieve. We hope you enjoy these volunteer tales.

All the best
Helen and Savita
London, December 2002