

Experience story

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About the job

As a Project Coordinator for the Lideke Wery Educational Institute in Induruwa, Sri Lanka, I was involved in a variety of activities. For about 6 hours a day I contributed to the management of the school, together with a Sri Lankan headmaster and a Project Consultant, who was a Dutch pensionado. For about 3 hours a day I was preparing and teaching a class in spoken English. My students had typically passed their O or A level exams and were seeking to improve their knowledge of English in order to get into university eventually. The culture at the school was very open, although I had to keep in mind the fact that Sri Lankans are generally sensitive people. Any unclarities could be solved immediately by asking one of my two colleagues and unless something urgent would come up, I was able to freely work throughout the week. Once a week there would be a management meeting where we as a management team would talk about each other's activities in the preceding week and plans for the next.

Both the contact with my students and with the staff members gave me some great insights in the local culture. What struck me most was how tight the family bonds are; it is perfectly normal for a guy to take the afternoon off if his wife/daughter has a job interview as he might accompany her to inspect her future office and colleagues.

About AIESEC

Because the project where I did my internship was partly founded by Dutch HR consultant Ebbinge & Co., they also conducted the application procedure for the internship. I was already in AIESEC's database at that point in time. When quite suddenly, the school needed to apply for my visa, AIESEC Maastricht did a great job sending the letter of recommendation over the weekend, even though the coordinator was on a holiday. This really shows the dedication of the people active with AIESEC Maastricht.

At first the local committee repeatedly did not invite me for AIESEC activities. I have no idea why this was the case as later they asked me to join them for activities, in none of which I took part eventually. When it came to applying for a visa for my successor, AIESEC again proved to employ some very capable and flexible people. The local president arranged everything within one day, so that the whole procedure could easily be finalised in time.

Still, I consider it strange that AIESEC Sri Lanka requests a € 180,- fee from the school in addition to the € 200,- fee that I had already paid when I was admitted into the database, especially when considering that I interned for a charity funded with donations from people and businesses in the Netherlands.

About the culture

I was lucky enough to have my parents visit me for a week. A driver can be arranged - do ask a colleague, friend or me for a reference - at a reasonable price here, which enabled us to tour the most important cultural sights of the island over the course of five days. I also spent some weekends scuba diving, which is great in the Southwest between November and May. Go in the morning on a sunny day! Places like Hikkaduwa and Unawatuna are known for their large surfing communities and the beach parties that go along with them, while Mirissa is much more quiet and easy-going.

Sri Lanka is also an ideal base for exploring other parts of Asia, as most flights from Colombo to capitals in the region are affordable even on a Sri Lankan salary, while going to Thailand or Singapore is an absolute bargain. I myself went to Northwest India on my own and had a great time!

Personal impact

I think that in a few months or maybe even years, I can better point out what I learned during my internship. Now, however, I can already see that it has shown me that people can and should be (made) responsible for themselves. I have seen people with severe handicaps, family problems or money issues stay positive and on the lookout for opportunities to improve their lives. The power of will is great among many Sri Lankans because they do not have time to sit down under it and there usually is no government to take care of them. Of course, this also makes for some serious problems but the mindset among the people that goes along with this system/culture is very determined, positive and down-to-earth.

One of the things I have learned as a person is that keeping a professional problem strictly professional is the most important advice in a conflict at work. One of my close co-workers was not yet aware of this and expressed his disapproval of some of my plans in a very personal way. It was a clear example of a person being governed by emotions instead of sensible choices, as is the case more often. I am happy, and maybe even a bit proud, that I managed to turn things back to normal by staying calm and taking the time to point out that our common interest was more important than the differences we had.

Additionally, by making the 2013 budget, my financial and Excel skills have improved hugely, which is something I have hoped to achieve for a long time already.

Recommendation

I can recommend taking this internship to anyone who feels a great degree of responsibility over what they do and who are willing to really take the time to adapt to another culture. Without a degree of cultural awareness, patience and an open mind it can be frustrating and anyone interested should be honest with themselves about being able to see many of your plans clash with local customs. I realise this may sound too negative. It is wonderful to see your students develop week by week and notice them apply the things you have taught them! As for the management work, there is a great deal of freedom as to how you plan your agenda, the opportunity to really make a difference and an abundance of professional and personal skills you can attain that may help you in your further career.