

Experience Story

General Information

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Name of AIESEC abroad: AIESEC Colombo South, Sri Lanka
Name of the organization: Lideke Wery Educational Institute
Duration: 4 months

Internship Program

I volunteered as a Project Coordinator at the Lideke Wery Educational Institute in Induruwa, Sri Lanka, which is a charity school aiming to improve the English and IT knowledge of underprivileged students in the area. As Project Coordinator I was responsible for teaching English at the school, supporting the headmaster, being the point of contact for the Dutch foundation that (financially) supports the LWEL and so on. In addition, I was engaged in projects such as writing the Annual Report, developing a new website, PR (success stories, newspaper publications), teacher training and finding “new” second-hand laptops for the school.

In my internship I faced challenges every day, which is what I loved about doing it. One of the most significant is the tight financial position of the Institute. I had to negotiate to reduce the price of a newspaper publication, I managed to find some free second-hand school books and I tried to find free second-hand laptops for the school (I did not succeed in the latter challenge). With such challenges you just have to be creative and find a way around. Of course I emphasized the fact that we are a charity institute and past successes of the Institute, which usually help to convince people.

Cultural Experience

Cultural differences and cultural challenges are of course present on a daily basis when you visit a country like Sri Lanka. However, by being open minded and well prepared there was no situation that I could not handle or that turned my world upside down. Of course there are major differences like the pace of life, the food, the importance of social status and the large differences between people with different social statuses. The latter difference has only reinforced my personal belief that all people are equal, regardless of social status, race, ethnicity, gender or otherwise.

Another important difference is that everything happens slower in Sri Lanka. The pace of life is slower (or more relaxed, depending on your personal point of view) and deadlines are not very important. This showed me again how stressed the Dutch culture is, with everybody always being in a hurry. Similarly, people should enjoy life a bit more and look around instead of looking only on their phone.

At the LWEL, all my colleagues were local. The way of working at the school was therefore very much based on the local culture, although some Dutch ‘twists’ are also used. On top of that, my colleagues invited me to their homes for their birthdays, baby showers and other celebrations. This provided me with a unique experience of the real Sri Lankan culture. Moreover, I lived in the school which is situated in a small village in a rural area of Sri Lanka, so everybody in the village knows who you are and people are genuinely interested to get to know you.

Personal Development

During my time in Sri Lanka I always felt welcome and at home at the Institute, which is of course mostly thanks to my colleagues. Some things that I learnt about myself is that I am very independent and that I don't like to be dependent on others, especially when it comes to things with deadlines. In addition, I easily take responsibility, also for things that are not necessarily mine to do. My pitfall with this is that I find it difficult to say no. Sometimes I even postpone my own/regular work to help someone else with his or her work.

In addition, I found out that being friendly to people can really open them up. Initially, some of my colleagues were not very open to me because I was only their colleague for 4 months. However, by being friendly and genuinely interested in them they opened up and we got a really good relationship. So being friendly and interested in other people can really open them up, even in different cultures.

One of the most difficult things was to be culturally sensitive all the time. When you slip once, this can immediately have large consequences. For example, I once forgot that Dutch people can be very direct and replied to a student as I would reply to a Dutch person. This got her crying and I had to apologize to her. This is something I will always remember, so I hope I will be less prone to forget about my cultural background again.

Fortunately, I know that I have made her, and the rest of my students, very happy by teaching them. I loved teaching them and they loved me as a teacher, which was evident in the classroom. For them it was a great opportunity to learn English from a foreigner and they are very thankful for that opportunity. On top of that, I have put a smile on people's face by just talking to them and being interested (e.g. the villagers) and also by buying some peanuts in the bus from a poor man for 10 eurocents!

All in all, what I liked most about my internship is that I got the opportunity to truly get to know the Sri Lankan culture and that I got along with my colleagues so well. I had an exceptionally good relationship with my colleagues and it was quite an emotional moment when I had to say goodbye to them. Also the students were very thankful and with them I also had a very good relationship. A long story short, the people that I met have made my internship an unforgettable experience.