

GIFT Bursary- Sri Lanka Trip
Jessica Hawksley

After 6 years at medical school, I had the opportunity to develop my understanding of medicine in another country through an 8 week elective programme which GIFT have kindly helped me to fund.

With such an array of places to visit, it took me a long time to decide upon where my aims and objectives would be best achieved. I have a personal drive to become a general practitioner in a small village so decided that, rather than spend all of my time in a hospital setting, I would try to learn about rural medicine on a smaller scale. I also hoped to visit a developing country so that I could see how medical management would vary to that of the UK. I felt that, by doing so, I would be faced with multiple challenges, both culturally and medically and I looked forward to seeing how I would cope with the changes.



Galduwa Temple for Arms Giving

After seeing photographs and hearing multiple recommendations, I decided to visit the beautiful country of Sri Lanka and found a small medical clinic known as 'The Rainbow Clinic' in the small village of Seenigama. The clinic is part of the 'Foundation of Goodness', set up in 1999 by Kushil Gunasekera with the aim of providing holistic support to the rural community and to bridge the gap between the rural and urban sectors. Following the Boxing Day tsunami in 2004, the foundation has become of even more importance to the villagers, acting as a rock as they rebuild their lives. With the support of many volunteers, this programme has gone from strength to strength and now incorporates many different areas including the women's enterprise (developing cookery and dress making skills), English teaching, the dive centre, computer skills and the pre-school. The centre supports

the needs of the 25 neighboring villages and there never seems to be a dull moment!

I had the pleasure of working alongside this team and the number of learning experiences I underwent were immense. By living and working in the tiny village, I quickly became fully immersed into the Sri Lankan culture and Girly, the woman I lived with, ensured I learnt the ways of Sri Lankan women. Both Girly and the sports staff members spent time teaching me Singala, the most widely spoken language in the area, which enabled me to interact more with the villagers and gain their trust. Their delight when I refused to use the knife and fork handed to me at the meal time was wonderful, and I think many barriers were broken down at that very moment when they saw my willingness to eat the rice and curry dinners alongside them with my hands. (and provided much amusement at the same time!)



Girly showing me how to grate a coconut Sri Lankan style

My main learning experiences stemmed not just from volunteering in the medical clinic but from Girly, who taught me how to cook traditional

Sri Lankan food, complete with spices at levels I never thought existed and the hard manual labour of grating coconut for the homemade coconut milk (a basis for many dishes). When I returned home one day carrying a bundle of material, we immediately spent the rest of the afternoon making dresses and chattering away about our two very different lives. Many other experiences that will live with me forever, have resulted from visits to the homes of newly formed friends in the village and from day trips alongside them and I hope to describe a few.



There is something quite special about the moment that you are invited to someone's house for a meal. You know that they will have been cooking for hours, preparing a variety of dishes for you to sample and, despite any financial hardship a banquet always seemed to be delivered. I was always made to start eating before anyone else in the family, and the pressure to eat was quite immense! My plate would be immediately filled as soon as it began to empty, and I would have to eat until I was fit to burst! I initially found this difficult as I knew that there was an order of eating and worried that food would run out. Guests would begin, followed by the men, then the children and finally the women in the family. Though this was not always the case, it was the norm in most village households and, as I come from a house where the whole family sit down together at meal times it took me a long time to accept this change. Everyone was so willing to share and involve me in their lifestyle, every visit provided new experiences. I even got dressed in one woman's wedding sari which was fun!



Me in a sari on a visit to a friends house.

The biggest shock to me was that of the attitude to women in Sri Lanka. By living and working in the village, attitudes were often more extreme than large towns with a more relaxed approach. Many activities that I participated in, such as swimming in the sea, were only observed by the women, whilst the men joined in wholeheartedly. Many patients attending the medical clinic were women complaining of fatigue and joint pain and I can completely understand why. Coming from a lifestyle in England, where I have been given complete independence and see myself as equal to my male counterparts, I struggled to comprehend how the roles of each sex seemed so ingrained. I discussed this with some of the boys I knew, and they felt women should do the cooking, cleaning and look after the children. When I explained that my father often cooked and cleaned in my house, I wasn't quite prepared for the look of shock on their faces, they simply couldn't comprehend how that could happen! I made it my project to teach as many of them how to make a cup of tea as possible. It was a start.

The village of Seenigama was a predominately Buddhist population and so, every month at the time of the full moon (poya), various celebrations took place. I was lucky enough to be present for one of the largest poya days as, alongside the full moon, Buddha's birthday and time of enlightenment was also being celebrated. I was invited by the Foundation of Goodness, to join them in an 'arms giving' event as a large temple. Here, the foundation were going to provide food for those who had been observing silt for the past 24 hours as an act of goodwill and respect and I joined them in this exchange. We then

visited the local village temple, which had been freshly painted for the special occasion, and sat whilst the villagers prayed and showed their respect. I wore a white outfit that covered both my knees and shoulders and felt extremely privileged to be part of the peaceful atmosphere created. The time spent at the temple allowed me sit and spend time self reflecting, something I feel the rushed lifestyle I'd led in England had not allowed me to do and I thoroughly appreciated it. I feel that, had I not been living with and working closely alongside Sri Lankan villagers, I would not have been part of such a wonderfully respectful experience and I will always be grateful to those I lived with for allowing me to become so involved in their religious culture.

My eight weeks placement in Sri Lanka has now come to a close, and I could continue to describe many other learning experiences I had the pleasure of participating in. The 8 weeks were intense but allowed me to really spend time appreciating another culture and reflecting upon my own and I can only thank Reg Gilbert and the members of the GIFT trust, for supporting me through this trip. It really has been a life changing experience and I will never forget the life long friends I have made along the way.

Thank you.

Jessica Hawksley