

Name: Maigane Etienne

Country: Haiti

Volunteering period: December 2019 – June 2020



Final Impression, August 2020

My name is Maigane and I am 22 years old. I come from Haiti but live in France. With the French government program Civic Service, I had the chance to travel abroad to India and volunteer 7 months for Sambhali Trust. I came on December 6th, 2019 and left on June 17th, 2020. My time in India was incredible, full of experiences, and enriching. I had the opportunity, one month after my arrival, to build a new project in Setrawa village, Thar Desert - Rajasthan for 3 months. We had to teach English and organize workshops in the government schools and do admin work related to recruiting new volunteers and finding funds for the new projects in the village. However, I spent 5 months in total in Setrawa because all of the NGO volunteers and family members came for the lockdown and quarantine. This overall experience taught me so much about the Indian culture, ways of living, life in the desert, and about myself. Even though I am back in France, the faces of the children, the people in the desert, the sand, the smell of chai in the morning, and the beautiful landscapes of the sand dunes are still vivid in my mind.

About my experience as a volunteer:



One month after my arrival, I and 2 other volunteers left for Setrawa Village, which is 100 km from Jodhpur in the Thar desert. Our mission: Establish a new Sambhali project by working as volunteers in government schools. We had to teach English to students from 3 to 16 years old. Those students spoke very little to no English at all. Plus, we had to do admin work to develop this Pilot project and to ensure the project is viable.

We were staying at Dev Bagh Guesthouse in the village of Viramdeogarh. We were living with Mahendra and Natu, the cook. Both took care of us and made us feel like at home. Every morning, we had a little yellow taxi driving us to our schools. We worked in 3 government schools, with 2 volunteers in each school. In the first 2 weeks, I was working alone in my School (Udawton ki dhaniya School). I met 35 students, from 3 to 13 years old, divided into 5 classes. Those children stole my heart from day one. With basic Hindi skills after some time, I started getting to know them, their names, ages, more about their family members, and of course, they started getting to know me either.

After one week, I managed to know all their names, however little did I know the number of students would increase day by day. We went from having 35 to 65 students. 2 weeks later, Carin, a German volunteer, joined me. We were a very good team and established a fun learning method for the children. With structure, lessons, learning games and activities, we taught them the English alphabet, body parts, colors, continents, left & right, vocabularies of daily routine, everyday life, 5 senses, talk about themselves (name, talk about how they are, age, country, family members, describing each other, etc.).



We also gave them lecture exercises and reading lessons. Our goal was to make them, by the end of the 3 months, capable of having a conversation in English so they could introduce themselves, talk about their families and what they like and dislike. We were beyond satisfied with the end result and are proud of them and their progress. Seeing my students, coming every day to school by walk (very long ways for most of them and without eating breakfast but with big smiles on their faces and eager to learn), made me

realize that we have to be grateful and not take anything for granted in life. They are very strong and intelligent. I miss them so much and I wish all the best for them and their future.

About India:

I had a direct flight from Paris to Jodhpur, with a stop in Delhi. I got picked up at Jodhpur airport and was welcomed with a flower necklace and a cup of chai (my favorite thing) at Durag Niwas Guesthouse after. During the first days, I couldn't realize that I was in India, it didn't feel real. The mission was planned for months and I was finally there and it was nothing as I imagined. The people were much nicer, the city more alive and noisier, the weather much colder (I didn't expect this at all), the cows even more numerous, the food even more delicious and the culture much deeper. Unsurprisingly, I've adapted easily to my new home. I had the chance to travel a little bit around India and got to know its culturally-rich history. With some volunteers, I went to the North and more places in Rajasthan. I explored Jodhpur and its wonderful historical sites, too. As all Indians say: in India, everything is possible - that is what I love about this country. Indian people are strong and resilient, a quality that warms my heart because we Haitians are the same. Indians are lovely and kind. I met a lot of wonderful people among the staff of the Guest House and Sambhali: Roxanne (the greatest, who is doing an amazing job with Sambhali - who was there for us as volunteer coordinator and friend), Mukta, Govind's wife, (this wonderful and strong woman who took care of us), Bunty Bhabha (I am grateful for knowing him and his lovely family), Monica (the queen), Vimlesh, Pappu, Lalit and Ladu Singh Ji. Also, I had the chance to be close to the children of both houses: Ayush, Laadli, Piyush, Daksh & Chitra. And of course, Chili and her puppies. I miss them all, words can't describe how I feel.



About life in the desert:

When we arrived on January 2nd, I discovered a lost safe haven in the middle of the Thar desert: Setrawa. The vast sand dunes, the countless peacocks and antelopes, the breathtaking sunrises and sunsets, the kind and friendly neighbors and the strong women made every day special. This experience taught me a lot about life and myself. I learned a little bit of Hindi which allowed me to talk to the women in the village and the staff. I got to know more about them, their lives, families and their thoughts. I also learned to ride a horse (Shanti) with the best teacher, Léana. And, not forgetting to mention the highlight of our days: volleyball games.



About Sambhali:

Sambhali Trust is such a pillar in the life of the marginalized women and children in Jodhpur and Setrawa. From the vision and idea of Govind, Sambhali's founder, to now, this NGO is doing an amazing job with all the empowerment centers and development projects. I am really proud to say that I had the opportunity to volunteer for Sambhali. They promote values that are essential to me: empowerment and independence of women. The teachers and the staff are an efficient and strong team. What they are doing will have a positive impact on the next generations.

About the COVID-19 quarantine in India:

Being in quarantine in Setrawa was definitely a roller coaster experience. Between the 47°C heat, the frequent power cuts and the everyday heavy sandstorm, my wheel of emotions was all over the place. However, we wanted to maximize our time there at its best. The food distribution project was our priority as it aimed to provide food for the most vulnerable families in the Thar desert's villages, who were left alone and helpless in this tremendous difficult time. I am honored to have been able to participate in this project. We tried to stay positive by focusing on our work for Sambhali around the villages & enjoyed and learned as much as we could living there with an Indian family. We are really thankful for their hospitality. And we certainly have a lot to talk about and a lot to remember.

SOME PICTURES OF THIS WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE:

Photos credits: © Antonio Zafra, Léana Onno

My School: Udawton ki dhaniya School



Some of my students: Sangeeta & Vishal (and Bedaram hiding in the back)



The teacher at school showing us pictures of his newborn



Sunset in Viramdeogarh



Family during the COVID-19 lockdown at Dev Bagh



The little yellow taxi

