

EVS in Kosovo 2011-12

I got the chance to do EVS in Kosovo from September 2011 to June 2012. When I applied, I just about knew where Kosovo was but I'd no idea at all what awaited me there. I'd very little time to prepare or to learn about the country beforehand as I was accepted at the last minute to fill a sudden vacancy with VSI (Voluntary Service International) an Irish sending organisation. The weeks I did have were busy saying goodbye to friends and family and packing up. VSI were wonderful during these busy few weeks, helping me organise my insurance for my trip and with any queries I had, and they were always at the end of an email during my months abroad.

I arrived to 30 degree September heat that felt sweltering after the wet Irish Summer back home. I was greeted by Muhamet, director of Balkan Sunflowers Kosovo (BSF) where I'd be volunteering and spent the first night in his house. I met the other EVS volunteers, from Poland, Finland, Germany and England, who'd be stationed at various centres around Kosovo run by BSF. My first day in Kosovo was daunting and hectic and unlike anything I'd experienced before. After a breakfast in Muhamet's house of spicy sausage stew and a Kosovar dish made of baked flour with fried oil poured over it, with his Albanian-speaking family, the other volunteers and I, along with some BSF staff visited ancient castle ruins in Novo Brdo and had a traditional Kosovar lunch with a family out in the country side. We then caught a bus that evening to Sarajevo in Bosnia for EVS on-arrival training and a chance to meet EVS volunteers from all over Europe who'd arrived to volunteer in various parts of the Balkans.

After a week's general training in beautiful Sarajevo we returned to more practical training with BSF in Kosovo. This training included how to react if you find yourself in a field you suspect might be mined, how to keep safe from packs of stray dogs and avoiding neocolonialism in our work. After a few days of this training and suitably petrified we were assigned to one of the four BSF Learning Centres and delivered to our host families where we'd live for the next 3 months.

My host family was a wonderful, welcoming Ashkali family and Mehmet the father of the family worked in the centre where I volunteered. I lived there and shared a room with a quiet but lovely Finnish volunteer who also worked at my centre. The family had four sons with whom we did homework, watched dodgy Albanian pop music on tv and played games. The mother of the family did not speak any English (in fact no one in the family had more than a word or two of English) but it didn't stop her miming and attempting to converse with us as she asked after our families, work and appetites.

I volunteered in the Learning Centre in Fushe Kosove/ Kosovo Polje. The BSF Learning Centre Network works to help children and young people from the Roma minorities (including Ashkali and Egyptians) in Kosovo to enroll in, attend, and succeed in school. It does this through Pre-School, Language Clubs, Homework Club, and Women's Literacy classes. As an international volunteer my role was to bring positivity, new energy and ideas and enthusiasm to the centre.

The biggest challenge early on was the language. Funnily enough I hadn't given too much thought to the fact I was setting off to live and work in a country where I didn't speak a word of the language. Unfortunately for me, Albanian bears no resemblance to French and Spanish which I'd previously studied. But if ever there

was a way to learn a difficult language quickly, volunteering in a Homework Club is it! By the end of the first day I knew the numbers to twenty, and by the end of the first week I could do the times tables in Albanian. It wasn't all plain sailing. It's a huge challenge to be surrounded by colleagues and children, however lovely, and feel entirely excluded because you literally cannot understand a word of what's being said around you. However it's a wonderful incentive to work hard to learn the language and is also probably quite a healthy thing for a native English speaker to experience as we're usually able to make our way in English wherever we travel. I found a fantastic language teacher and the twice-weekly classes became one of the highlights in my week.

There are so many things I miss having finished my volunteering in Kosovo, and perhaps surprisingly after my struggles, I definitely miss speaking Albanian. It led to such funny situations like finding yourself on Facebook Chat having simultaneous conversations in Albanian and Serbian with different friends, which is better than any brain training I imagine. It also let me have so many interesting conversations and learn so much about life in Kosovo which I'd have missed out on if only speaking to the people who speak English.

My day to day work at the centre usually involved doing homework with small groups of kids and planning educational activities for the various groups of kids. The kids I worked with couldn't have been lovelier and constantly surprised me with their affection, warmth and enthusiasm. Our centre catered mainly for Ashkali children, a Roma minority that speak Albanian, although we also had a small Serbian programme for Roma children where I spent one day a week. Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians face huge discrimination and exclusion in Kosovo (as in many other countries) which results in Roma children often not attending school or not getting the support needed to succeed in school. In the centre children got a hot meal, a friendly fun atmosphere, and support to succeed in school. We had weekly themes linked to topics in school, games, music, and arts and crafts.

Another early challenge was the food. Kosovars don't really do breakfast, except tea which they have in tiny glasses and manage to cheat the laws of physics and spoon in about 5 teaspoonfuls of sugar. They are demons for sugar, oil, salt and bread. As breakfast was a bit of a puzzle for them I got really interesting things like leftover dinner for breakfast: chicken drumsticks and peppers stuffed with mince and rice, rice cooked in chicken stock, stews with pepperoni. One morning I even got chips! Somehow I got really used to the food, the salt, the oil and using a hunk of bread as an eating implement. Although if I never saw cabbage again I'd be pretty happy having eaten it daily in various guises for 10 months. There are also some delicious dishes from the region like pita and flia which I miss now I'm home. Colleagues at the centre invited me to their house one weekend to learn how to make the traditional pita dish (pastry filled with spinach, cheese or meat) which was yet another example of their welcoming spirit and eagerness to share their culture.

At weekends there was the opportunity to catch up with the other EVS volunteers in Pristina and to enjoy the cafe culture in the capital as well as visit other countries in the Balkans. Us five EVS volunteers also met regularly to work on various projects including writing a manual for future volunteers and setting up a volunteer club with skills shares and information evenings to encourage volunteerism in

Kosovo. We also got the chance to work with other organisations on various projects promoting Roma culture and working to end discrimination against Roma in Kosovo.

After 3 months with the host family I moved into an apartment with some Kosovar friends. It was lovely to see a different side to Kosovo and to be more able to catch up with friends for coffee in the evenings and generally have my own space. As well as having the opportunity to visit Sarajevo and Belgrade for EVS training, Kosovo is ideally situated to explore the Balkans which I did before returning home travelling through Greece, Montenegro and Albania.

It's difficult to sum up in a few paragraphs what a truly wonderful, formative and positive experience volunteering in Kosovo was for me. It was a great chance to do something very different, meaningful, and interesting. During our early training I came across a quote from Ralph Emerson that said: "To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived - this is to have succeeded". Volunteering in Kosovo gave me an appreciation of the impact that we can have through seemingly small actions, wherever it may be. Sitting down with a group of kids and helping them with their homework and thus helping them to avoid humiliation and discrimination in school ensured they could breathe a little easier. Seeing the genuine smiles on kids faces when they cracked a problem, managed to write a new word, or produced a new work of art convinced me that my efforts were worthwhile and also made me enormously grateful that I got the chance to be part of a project that is having a tangible impact.

There were definitely times when I seriously wondered what I had gotten myself into heading off to a country whose language I didn't speak and where I knew no one. Through power cuts and water cuts I gained a new appreciation for electricity and running water. It was particularly difficult seeing the shocking poverty many of the kids I was working with were living in. But those tough days were far-outnumbered by so many wonderful, funny and rewarding times in a beautiful country with truly lovely people. Most of all I made amazing friends, young and old, who ensured that although the 10 months flew, I left with treasured memories, and determined to return soon to visit them all!