

Sometime in the summer, Maria said I should consider visiting the project, just for the weekend, to see the work that has been done there. She knows I work too much and probably wouldn't have much more than a weekend to spare. It sounded like a great idea, but the more I thought about it, the more I convinced myself that there's no point flying all that way for 2 days, so I decided to go for 4 days & a few days later I realised 2 days in the office for the week wouldn't make much difference & so I replied to Maria that I would come for a week! I think she was a little shocked that I was taking so much time off work & and to be honest, so were my colleagues and so was I! The only thing I hadn't thought of was the weather & just before leaving I saw long time Dhaka Project supporter Manuel De Souza who told me that it was knee high water from the monsoons and I would need some Wellington boots! But who has Welly boots in Dubai? Never mind, I would just have to get wet & even if I'd had some, with all the luggage Maria had for me to carry over to the project there was no way of fitting them in & although I was smiling at the thought of walking through Dubai airport in shorts and welly boots!

Flying in towards Dhaka, the early morning sun still rising, the view was a tapestry of lush green country dotted with ponds of lakes of water & it looked quite idyllic until you remembered the floods from the monsoon had washed away slum houses, made people homeless and increased disease and sickness. I was truly spoilt when Maria picked me up from the airport with Solaiman, because they had a people carrier with a/c rather than a rickshaw. I was staying in the Dhaka Project guest house, conveniently located slap bang in the middle of the project. Maria was worried that I wouldn't like it (being too used to business style hotels) and had gone to a lot of effort to clean it and get it ready for me. In fact, she still thought I wouldn't like it and should stay in hotel & but it seemed fairly pointless to come all that way and stay an hour away, wasting 2hrs a day in traffic & and the guest house to me is much nicer than a hotel. Its warm, cosy, clean and convenient & I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else. I spent the rest of my first day being given a tour of the project by Rasel seeing the amazing results that have been achieved in only 2 short years. Its phenomenal. The 200 children in nursery, pre-school and primary, sewing school, cooking school, beauty salon school, clothes shop, internet café, welding and carpentry shops, Dhaka project rickshaws, general store and of course the Dhaka project cows and calf! Walking into a class room, all the children standing up in their clean blue uniforms greeting me in perfect English, it was heart warming to see. In the nursery the children soon formed an orderly queue to take it in turns to be lifted up as high in the air as I could & with beaming smiles they would rejoin the end of the queue for more, rather like a human fair ground ride! Seeing what had been achieved, the levels of education and most importantly the endless smiles and happiness evident on the faces

of the children makes you realise why your there& and I knew Maria would have a week of hard work for me! Every morning Maria would meet with her team, Rasel, Solaiman, Jewel, Noyen and the volunteers to dish out daily to do lists. My first job was to go shopping& how hard can that be? No, problem, it shouldn t take too long& or so I thought! Of course you can t get any suppliers to make regular deliveries of food and general supplies for running the project that would be too easy! Rasel and I set out on a rickshaw for a day of trekking around various areas of town, haggling and seeking out the products on our list because we didn t dare return to Maria with it incomplete! We bought sacks of potatoes and daal, tables and chairs for the school, bicycles, spices, cassette players for the class, water, school shoes for the kids and even a microwave& and there I was wondering how was this all supposed to fit on a rickshaw? Luckily, we ended up in an area of town called Tongi, which has a very peculiar and unique odour to it which clings to your clothes like smoke at a bonfire& only not so pleasant! However, its great for buying supplies at very good prices& and it turns out that you can rent trucks here too! So as we worked our way back through Dhaka to the project we stopped and picked up everything on the way& finally making it back after dark& we had just about completed the list, but had searched high and low and couldn t find one item on the list baby cots for the nursery. Thankfully Rasel managed to find a carpenter locally who could make them in a day or two, so at least we could tell Maria we had completed the list! I ended the day dehydrated, exhausted and stinking after having run around like a headless chicken all day, but Rasel and I were very happy we had completed our list and wouldn t be in for a grilling from Maria (thou she is Portuguese, you could imagine she was related to a strict German matron)! For the rest of my stay at the project everyday was packed full with chores: distribution of supplies, painting one of the nurseries, doing admin, such as helping with the accounts and helping write proposals. Admin is definitely not something Maria has much time for when she is in Dhaka, and I m sure not something she enjoys& thankfully an angel arrived in the form of Christiana, a volunteer from Portugal& who just so happened to be an auditor by profession, thou Maria had no idea until she arrived. She was an amazing help to Maria in getting to grips with a backlog of accounts and admin work to be done. In Dhaka, Maria is like a woman possessed, quite unlike the Maria I knew from Dubai. She works morning to night, running around like crazy, dealing with people from the community, parents of the kids who need help, task mastering the rest of us to ensure the to do lists are done, working on new initiatives like planning a new medical centre, somehow managing to cram in admin work and getting to spend some quality time with the kids whose lives she has changed forever. I don t know how she keeps it up, its exhausting just watching her! Not to mention the frustrations of getting things done in Dhaka& constant power cuts and losing all her accounts and admin work when computers crashed and mis-communications common to a

country like that for example, she requested fire extinguishers to be purchased, but what turned up were actually gas masks!! During my stay, there were some angry protests which resulted in a curfew, riot police were out in force and there were some clashes&this meant the power was out and telecoms were down, I couldn't call out, but received a call from my office where my colleagues were worried because they heard someone had been killed in the riots. But like any big city in the west, this was isolated to certain areas and we were perfectly safe and saw no trouble at all, it just restricted the things we could achieve and jobs we could work on, slowing everything down once more. Blood, sweat and tears comes to mind& things can be so frustrating there&a small task, easy to finish in a place like Dubai, can take days in Dhaka. Coming from a business environment, to me, Maria definitely works in an unorthodox way&and we had some heated discussions on what we each thought was the best way to get things done, but what really matters is that she gets results, not how she gets there, and the results are evident.

In a country where people often live on less than \$1 a day, 80% of the nations exports are textiles and you have trouble persuading parents to let their children go to school (because they could be working), where rubbish lines the streets and slum houses seem to line the endless water ways, where many adults seem to have lacked hope their whole lives and so don't dare have any ambition, it is striking to see the Dhaka project flower from the blood, sweat, laughter and tears that Maria has poured in from her heart over the last 2 years. The fact that she did this whilst still holding down a job is a testament to her dedication and to the patience and support of her employer. You can see the hope and ambition in the children's eyes, they dare to dream where their parents didn't and you ask them what they want to do when they grow up and they wish to be pilots, doctors, teachers and of course, after Maria, air hostesses. Two things struck me in my last few days at the project. On my last Friday, Christiana and I went into the centre of Dhaka to see some sites, the parliament and opposite it, the shrine of President Zia. What struck us both was how clean and perfect the huge park surrounding the shrine was, no litter, nor dirt, just perfectly manicured lawns and paths surrounding the shrine with its perfectly clean walls. Its so easy to think it's a waste of effort to try to make a difference in a place like Dhaka, you will never be rid of the rubbish and dirt, but it can be done and their shrine to President Zia is proof that it is possible for Dhaka to be clean. Secondly, I took some sudoku books to Dhaka, to teach some of the children how to play this game that seems to have gripped so many in recent years. I sat down with one of the pupils who was 12 years old and is hungry to learn. Two years ago he was in the slum, had never been to school, couldn't speak, read and write English and I'm assuming couldn't read and write in Bangla either. Yet he learnt how to play sudoku in less than half an hour. His methodical and logical manner in working out each problem, meant that after making mistakes and learning the

rules on the first puzzle he completed the others perfectly with no mistakes&I've since learnt that he finished the 3 books I left him within days! He has hope, he has ambition and thanks to Maria he has the opportunity to develop to his full potential. What an outstanding achievement.

Having spent a week on the project, full of so many different and opposing emotions, I was both happy to be heading back to Dubai, but also very sad to be leaving. Since returning to Dubai I have looked into how other charities spend their money and was saddened, shocked and a little angry to discover statistics varying from 30% to 90% spent on head office, admin and overhead costs. One of the beauties of the Dhaka project is that 100% of the money goes to the people who need it. Maria doesn't draw a salary, because she still has her job, in fact she even pays for all her flights to and from Dhaka herself. Don't expect corporate style reports and professional feedback - you have to pay people for that - so if you want to see expensive marketing and huge admin support, definitely work with another charity. But if you want to know your donations really go to those who need it, then this is the project for you&just don't expect Maria to respond to everybody in person, if she did that, there wouldn't be any time left to push the project forward! If you are someone who can find time off to be a volunteer there, I'm sure she would be only too happy for the assistance and I can highly recommend it as an incredibly rewarding experience&I surprised myself in going for a week, but have a feeling I may yet surprise myself again and return!