

## The Dhaka Project

“We are almost ready to land sir, could you put your seat in the upright position?” said the pretty cabin crew as we were about to touchdown at Dubai International Airport. I had been asleep for about 2 hours and it had been 5 hours since I had left the team at the Dhaka Project.

“The temperature outside is 27 degrees and you may use your phone” echoed into my ears and I knew it wouldn’t be long before I was home.

I caught the cab home and fell into my soft clean comforting bed well after midnight- it had been a hectic day.

I had left for Dubai airport the previous evening at 11pm for the flight at 2am. Having never been to Dhaka before I was a little apprehensive of meeting Maria and her team but nonetheless I was excited as I would finally see how I could help.

I think we all feel that we are capable of helping people in obvious need but I have to say I was particularly proud of actually setting off on my journey and doing it.

It made me feel good- there’s no doubt. I was a little anxious though that when I got there I would find it a little traumatic and would then find it difficult to withdraw and break my promise to help. Something I really didn’t want to do.

Would I feel anxious and guilty that I drive 2 cars and eat and drink in expensive restaurants in Dubai and wear designer label clothes? Or would they make me feel guilty for the excess in my life when others had so little? I am an average man. Ok I may buy the odd fair trade coffee from the supermarkets, eat organic eggs and subscribe to Amnesty International but the rest of the time I live my life like most in Dubai. I have never actively volunteered to help before. I have been content to do my bit by putting my hand in my pocket and giving hard cash for others – more appropriate feel - to do the work. Well that is what most charities want isn’t it?

The striking thing about flying into Dhaka is the contrasts- the bland grey of the stunted buildings against the lush green fields of crops and cotton.

It was humid as I passed through the simple airport but was courteously shown the way to the cashier who efficiently took my 50 USD and gave me a receipt for my entry visa. My line for the visa stamp was long but they

processed my application rapidly.

I waited for Maria who told me she was on her way and when I finally spotted her I was pleasantly surprised to see she was in the local ethnic dress to “blend in with the locals”

Once we greeted we fell into idle chit chat easily and my fears of a poor rapport dissolved away in the intense humidity of the morning. It was 9am. I was put at immediate ease and this was probably a combination of her personality and professional training as a flight attendant.

We hustled through the busy streets and within no time we arrived at our first spot - the guesthouse. The journey was punctuated by honking horns and weaving to miss the pot holes but in all, the sights and sounds were similar to the other developing countries I had visited to whilst backpacking a number of years earlier.

We met another volunteer at the guest house, Richard, and I managed to do my first good deed by checking his recent bout of food poisoning wasn't anything more serious. We chatted about the needs of the project and then his drivers for volunteering. It seems he was not that much different to me except that as he had retired and he had a little more time. He had been to the project 5 times before and planned many other trips.

Maria and I then went on a site visit to the schools. I was surprised that there wasn't a single school but in fact a collection of schools dotted short distances away. Her main problem, as I saw it, was that the project was not financially strong enough to buy its own property. They were thus at the mercy of landlords who invariably raised the rents and gave out eviction notices. Most landlords didn't like children to be using their premises as they caused noise and annoyance.

Our walk to the schools was interrupted by cries of “Maria, Maria” and huge infectious smiles of the children we met. She seemed like the piper at times with a line of children following her and running to get a hug.

The other boys were playing cricket as we advanced to the school and they were not at all disturbed by the strange man in black bowling a few wides at them- me!

My impression of the schools was that they were a beacon of hope. They were bright and multi-coloured but lacked pictures and murals. The art work that was displayed however was a testament to the children's imagination and

desires. There were hand prints with statements of who the children wanted to be – doctors, pilots, cricketers etc.

The medical centre was inadequate for the numbers who visited but a great start especially by someone without a medical background.

Maria like a sponge seemed to absorb the ideas I had where small improvements could be made and wrote down the ideas she felt she could act on. The team systematically and with pride took me through all the sites and they were not at all defensive about the ideas I had.

I met Kakoli and Amina who were enrolled at the school. Amina wanted to be a doctor and Kakoli wanted to be a pilot. Pilot Kakoli and Dr Amina then joined us on the rest of the tour. Their songs and dancing made me smile and any hint of tiredness vanished with the energy of their dancing and enthusiastic singing.

We paused for a few minutes at the guest house and were then joined by Samar. Samar another volunteer and a photographer helped by doing photography workshops with the children some of whom had never been photographed before let alone have had taken pictures. The work was a testament to his ability to draw out and highlight their obvious talent.

I chatted about the issues involved in the project and both Maria and Samar who meticulously answered my questions of the problems associated with the project over a Chinese meal at a nice local restaurant. As we chatted so much we barely managed to finish the food but they kindly packed the food for later consumption.

We then went to visit one of the women who had unfortunately suffered horrific burns and had been in the ‘best’ burns hospital in Dhaka for some months. The fact they she was deemed as a slum dweller didn’t help her case with regard to management of her condition by the medical team. The wards were a creeping relic of the Victorian era and over populate as expected.

The visit highlighted a key aspect which was to obviously to train the staff at the project to deal with such cases and of injury as far as possible, rather than pay for a below par service.

Our next visit was to pass by the Sheraton hotel in Dhaka who had kindly offered some storage space to Maria for donations and items that people and the incoming cabin crew had left. We had a swift orange juice by the pool whilst a group of Japanese tourists pounded up and down the pool.

Having picked up the boxes of donations and clothes – one of which was an alluring black negligee we headed back to the guest house before they kindly dropped me off at the airport at 7pm for my 10pm flight home.

Whilst at the airport I dwelled on all the things I had managed to experience in that day. What struck me most was that this project and I am sure others actually need volunteers. Money, donations and sponsorships etc is what feeds the project by paying for food, clothing, books and jobs for the locals but what money can't buy is what the project desperately needs and that is advice, skills and enthusiasm. Someone to paint a mural on the school wall, someone to advise on what equipment to buy, what the best teaching methods are, how to design the schools and houses, how to further encourage and nurture the potential of these people – but most of all how to give them hope and encourage any sense of ambition hidden away in the depths of their daily, hand to mouth existence.

I smiled to myself when I recounted my fears before the journey as they had evaporated very quickly when I got there - having been replaced by the desire to get more involved and to encourage others – like average me – to do the same.

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