

Our Ghana expedition - 2011

6.30am: the brick making machine is hammering away behind the campsite and the cockerels are crowing – good morning Ghana! For three weeks of summer 2011, twenty explorer scouts went to Hohoe in the Volta Region of Ghana. It was intense, hot and hard work, but it was also rewarding, gratifying, and an incredible experience.

Preparation for the expedition commenced in spring 2009 when we all had our introductory meeting and interviews with Jo Busby, the expedition leader. My brother had been on one of the previous expeditions in 2008, so I thought that I knew vaguely what it would be like, but when we finally got there this summer, it was nothing like I could have imagined.

Our fundraising started almost as soon as we had been emailed to say that we were going on the trip. Individually we were asked to raise £1,500, and £20,000 as a group. This money paid for our flights, food, tools, gas and transport. I think our fundraising became a sort of competition as to who could not only raise the most money, but also do it in the most inventive way. We packed bags at Sainsbury's, ran some quiz evenings, did a sponsored cycle ride to London, did sponsored hikes, sold tea and bacon rolls at school rugby games, sold cream teas at Harpenden Common Discovery Day, and sang Christmas carols to commuters at Harpenden station in the snow. A special mention goes to Will Dixon who shaved his long hair off as part of his fund raising – very creative. Not only did these events cause us to raise lots of money for charity, they really helped with team bonding and getting to know one another so that by the time July came and we were flying from Heathrow, I knew those 19 other explorers very well.

We were working and camping in a town called Hohoe in the south east of Ghana, in the Volta region of Ghana. It was quite a busy town but by the second week it didn't faze us and we were quite comfortable walking around it. The market area was my favourite part and this was where the cooking team would go each day to buy all the ingredients for the day's meals (and stock up on sweets and biscuits which would later be devoured by ants). We ate a lot of rice, chicken and vegetables while we were out there, but the highlight of it all as the fruit. The pineapples were sweet and juicy, and I couldn't resist the mangoes, despite being allergic to them!

While we were there we met and worked with the Ghanaian scouts who were all friendly and all had something a bit different to them. There was Amos who is the district commissioner out there and also tended to make funny screeching noises which the explorers enjoyed attempting to mimic. Peace and Gloria were the two girls who were extremely useful whenever we needed to go to the market or buy anything- they knew exactly where to buy things and how much to pay. Wisdom was the gadget guy; Raymond was crazy and constantly smiling, and Geoff and Nelson were the best at DIY when they were helping us at the school or hospital. I'm still in touch with a few of them and it's nice to be able to keep the friendship even though we are on different continents.

At about 10.00am each day, everyone would pile onto our small coach and get deposited at various locations. The cooking team would be dropped off at the market, one team would go to work on the hospital project, and the final two teams would go to the school project. The original project was supposed to be working to improve conditions in the Mother's Lodge at Hohoe hospital; however three months before the expedition left Jo was in Ghana and discovered that the hospital had received funding from elsewhere to refurbish the Mother's lodge. Luckily Jo found us another project in the local deaf school, the Volta Region School for the Deaf, so we divided our time between the two projects. At the hospital we built work surfaces for cooking on, painted benches for the women to sit on and replaced and fixed cupboards. However, this project was fairly quick to be finished so then we focused much more of our time on the School project.

At the school the headmaster asked us to improve the mosquito netting to the dormitory bunks but when we got there we found that many of the window frames had rotted and needed replacing too. The scouts therefore had to set to work replacing the rotting wood. Replacing the wood and nets was a grubby job at times. At one point, I kicked the bottom panel of wood off the wall and found a huge giant ant's nest- needless to say that the girls were all running out the room within seconds. By the time the three weeks was up we had finished 3 whole blocks, with a total sleeping capacity of roughly 200 (There were as many as 25 bunk beds in a room!) and went on to complete the dining room/assembly hall. We also painted a mural.

Of course doing all this work made the rest and relaxation all the more enjoyable. Every Sunday we would have an extra hour in bed, then have a breakfast cooked by the leaders (pancakes were a welcomed change to the usual bread and jam), and then we made an hour long journey to Wli Waterfalls. It was incredible to see the impressive white water of the Agumatsa River thundering about 60 meters down steep cliffs into a large pool below. In the diary I kept while out there I wrote, 'Rest day today was fantastic. Wli is beautiful and fascinating and I can't wait for next week.' When I first went in with some of the Ghanaian scouts I couldn't reach the back wall. You have to go in backwards because the water spray stings, the falling water hits you really hard and it's quite difficult to breathe under the fall. The second time I tried, Nelson helped me and I made it all the way in! For me, Wli days were among my favorites while I was there.

Wli waterfalls weren't the only cool experience of the trip; we also visited Tafi Atome, a monkey sanctuary where we were allowed to feed the monkeys bananas which everyone loved. We also went to Kakum National Park towards the end of the trip. It was here that we walked among the tree tops and the majority of us stayed the night in the rainforest in a tree house after a nighttime walk looking for animals (we found a tarantula but nothing else unfortunately). These experiences made the trip for me because each one taught me a little more about the culture and history of the country. The last few days of the trip were spent by the sea at Cape Coast, relaxing in a luxurious hotel with hot showers, double beds and air conditioning. It was heaven.

Our expedition to Ghana was amazing. Yes, at times tensions ran high, and at times the food was inedible, and at times the heat was too much. But these things added to the numerous positive aspects to form one of the best experiences of my life to date. It gave me the opportunity to do so many things that I would never have had the chance to do otherwise. I had a shower in the rain, I washed my hair in a waterfall, I learnt a new method of communication with people I had never met before, I learnt new campfire songs, I learnt history and geography, I slept in and I walked among the canopy layer of a rainforest. However, the most important aspect for me was the work that we did and seeing the impact that it directly had on those children's lives; a really spectacular achievement.

By Sally Crawford