

HUISH EPISCOPI PRIMARY NEWS

Ms Islip's Trip to Ladakh with 'Himalayan Children' Charity

(Ladakh is a region in the Indian states of Jammu and Kashmir that extends from the Kunlun mountain range to the main Great Himalayas to the south, inhabited by people of Indo-Aryan and Tibetan descent.)

A week in Ladakh ... my very first adventure in retirement!

I had been invited to accompany two other teachers from Taunton School, and founder of the charity '*Himalayan Children*', Gail Mc Allister Young, to go for a week's tour to see the work of the charity at first hand. Both Huish Episcopi Primary and Taunton International School have raised money in the past for the charity. The week would involve visiting schools, the children they support, sightseeing and spending time with our host family to see family life in Ladakh. I was also so excited at the prospect of seeing my first sight of the Himalayas.



My trip was self funded but I did have a personal objective and that was to spend a generous donation of £160.00 on resources for the Ladakhi schools that the charity supports. This donation had been given to me by staff and Governors to mark my retirement.

Ladakh is in the northern part of India nestled between Kashmir and Tibet. For many years it was not accessible to tourists. It is a spectacular part of India. Our initial flight took us into Delhi where the heat and humidity was sweltering. We planned an afternoon sightseeing and then, after an overnight stay, boarding a flight to Leh, the largest city in Ladakh.

Our afternoon of sightseeing in Delhi coincided with the Moslem holiday of Eid and we chose to visit the largest Mosque in India. Built of red sandstone and accommodation for up to 25,000 worshippers (most of whom seemed to be there) made for an intoxicating start to our tour. Travel to the mosque was in a mechanised rickshaw. The cramped seating, bewildering traffic rules and the sweltering heat as we weaved in and out of traffic, people and the occasional animal all served to confuse and overwhelm our senses!



The flight from Delhi to Leh was truly awe inspiring. Flying over the Himalayas was one of the most memorable experiences I have had to date. One of the last wildernesses on earth. On arrival in Leh, we were met by our host, Rinchen, and then followed advice, using the rest of the day to acclimatise to the altitude in order to avoid any sickness.

In the subsequent days there were so many highlights. It started by joining the crowds along the streets to welcome the return of the Dalai Lama to Ladakh (he has a residence there). The Dalai Lama is revered in Ladakh. Everywhere you go there are pictures of him and quotes from his writings and references to his wisdom. He visits or supports many of the schools in Ladakh that we in turn visited. The whole culture and society of Ladakh is strongly based on Buddhist values and this makes for the tolerant, kind and respectful welcome we had wherever we went. It was evident in the ethos of many of the schools we visited. I was fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of the Dalai Lama as he passed in his car and also enjoyed the whole processional occasion with people in their traditional dress, prayer scarves, performing musicians and monks.

After this, we visited a number of schools. At these schools I was able to present clothing and school resources that I had brought with me.

Himalayan children funds the education of over 36 children through sponsorship and donations. Rinchen, our host, visits the families initially who apply for support to assess their level of need. Only the most desperate families are selected. Typical stories included families where one parent had died or they have separated and the family have very limited means of support to educate their child. The backgrounds varied from nomadic families to Moslem or Buddhist families that have faced difficulties.



What quickly became apparent is that the schools have very limited resources and that education is greatly valued. The children may be educated in classes of 50 + and the surroundings are meagre and stark. Bare peeling walls are decorated with a few commercial posters or some poster type work produced by the children. Furniture is basic and crammed in. School starts at 10.00am and finishes at 4.30pm and takes place Monday through to Saturday. All children are expected to complete a lot of homework each evening! They sit quietly and respectfully in lessons and listen to teachers who are specialists in particular subjects and teach predominately from text books. This is the same for all children including five year olds. The children are expected to take responsibility and one very special moment was when we witnessed three pupils leading Buddhist prayers for the whole school.

We also visited some sponsored children in their own homes to give letters and presents to them from their sponsors. Sitting in cement walled rooms, cross legged on the floor, we were always made welcome and the hospitality from families that had so little, was humbling.

School closes in the winter months for around ten weeks while temperatures drop as low as -30 and the snow on the ground makes travel to and from the schools impossible for many. We met a group of village leaders who requested support from the charity to fund a teacher who could then be employed to teach the children in their own village for these precious months. When asked where the children will be taught they said inside except on warmer days (when the temperature is at 1 or 2 degrees above freezing!) On these days the children would be taught under a large canopy!

The four hour bus ride to Tingmosgang Nunnery was really special. We stayed overnight with the nuns...the youngest in training was seven! The scenery was spectacular and I was able to present the school with exercise books and other school stationery. The equivalent of £26.00 bought supplies for the school for a term whilst also supporting the local economy.

There is so much more I could tell. It was a privilege to see at first hand, that through the generosity of the Huish Episcopi Primary community, Ladakhi children were being given the gift of education. The money raised in the past few years through mufti days has gone straight into the schools and is much needed.

I could see it. I saw it in the eyes of a little ten year old boy who boarded at one of the schools. In the few minutes we spent with him, he kept blinking back his tears and was trying desperately to smile in gratitude for the clothes and school stationery he was being given. He said he loved school and was happy there; however it was evident that he was still mourning the death of his brother and missed parents who could no longer support him. The act of kindness and being singled out for a visit from the charity and the opportunity of a free school place was overwhelming for him.



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