

Dear Sir,

I wanted to share with you the time I spent in India earlier this year, which was partly made possible by the enormously generous money granted to me by the Trust. It really was the most extraordinary experience and one which I fear I will struggle to match in later life.

When researching possible destinations for my gap year, I found a few reports hugely more helpful than others in giving me an idea of what to expect. I wanted to structure this in as helpful a way for those considering travelling as part of a gap year, so I hope you might forgive the clunkiness of my report.

Why Kipling?

The aim of this trip was to do some volunteering, which was not a part of the epidemic of “voluntourist” ventures frequently offered to gap year students, the majority of which I found expensive, commercialised and quite different from the unique experience I wished to find.

I approached this with a fascination for India (wishing to spend a prolonged period of time there), a love for the outdoors and an interest in environmentalism. I actually discovered Kipling and its volunteer programme through the grant reports (this is perhaps why I regard this process as so important!).

About Kipling

Kipling is located in Madhya Pradesh, in the ‘heart’ of India on the outskirts of its third largest national park: Kanha. Started by a family of notable and charismatic environmentalists; the Wright family, it is now owned by the daughter of the founder, Belinda Wright. Not only were the Wrights incredibly generous to both myself and James, the other volunteer, but hugely inspiring. I really cannot express my thanks enough to the Camp and its wonderful Indian staff, who helped create such an unforgettable experience for me.

It is technically a hotel, being listed in the Lonely Planet and Tripadvisor etc.- but not only does this give no real reflection of Kipling: but I believe this fundamentally misunderstands what Kipling is.

Since its inception, Kipling has run a volunteer programme, which consists of two three month stints (October-December and January-April), with two volunteers (gap year students) selected for each stint. Whilst I was there, as a volunteer, I worked at Camp alongside the 16 local staff, some of which have been working at Kipling since its inception and the manager.

Tip for applying to Kipling: make sure you know which stint you would like. I had been recommended the earlier slot by a number of people, as the camp is generally busier, the weather less hot etc. However, as a result of Oxbridge applications, I did the latter: which was by no means disastrous(!), moreover, tiger sightings are far more frequent the later the

season gets. Alongside the volunteers, Belinda chooses a (generally Western) manager, who runs the camp, and generally does two years.

Interviews for the volunteer programme take place in the summer preceding your stint (i.e. mine was in the summer 2016), but there is no real deadline for applications. Belinda considers each application personally (you need to email her direct via the website). As a busy lady, a little notice is probably appreciated. It is all pretty informal and mine was just a general chat to get to know Belinda.

In fact, a theme of my experience of Kipling was the homeliness, warmth and family atmosphere of the Camp. I actually went into the experience knowing very little of what being a “volunteer” consisted of, which, in a sense, enhanced my time there. It was also exciting knowing I was yet to meet James, the other volunteer, who I was to spend the next 3 months with!

My trip!

I arrived in Delhi on 15th January, knowing very little of the logistics of my schedule. The Wrights live in Delhi, so I was to spend a night there before heading off to Kipling, which is a 12-hour train ride away. After a memorable night being hosted by the Wrights in Delhi, I was posted on a train to Kipling.



On the platform with Rajeev (Member of staff at the Kipling Delhi office)

Daily life at Kipling

Kipling is a magical place. Something which you will continually hear from guests is just how extraordinary a place it is. Having said this, life at camp was not always easy.



“The Shamyana”- the centre of camp.

James and I essentially were there to enhance the experience of Kipling for the guests, alongside the wonderful local staff. This included organising and facilitating activities for the guests in the afternoons and in the park (morning, 4.30 wake up, and afternoons). It did get pretty exhausting.

Venturing into the park so often with paying guests meant that it was paramount that we had knowledge of the park and its wildlife. Safaris would consist of a Kipling driver, a park guide and a volunteer (or the manager, Henry). Park guides were unreliable; therefore it was doubly important that we were of value on the drives and a good reflection of Camp. One of our first tasks was therefore familiarising ourselves with the species of birds and mammals in the park. James and I became rather competitive about it. He even started to master the trees of Kanha- something which I, regrettably, failed to do.

My favourite aspect of Camp, besides Orlando, who will be covered later, was Tara, the Camp elephant. Kipling is one of the only places in the world to offer an experience like it does to its guests- and being a volunteer there meant I was able to experience it almost daily. In the afternoons, James and I would either individually, or together, accompany guests down to the river, where Tara would bathe. I will never forget the times I spent down at the river with Tara, or the many conversations I had with guests along the way...



Orlando modelling in front of one of Tara's favourite bathing spots

Mealtimes were also an important aspect of life at Camp. Guests ate together on a large table in the Shamyana alongside Henry, James and I, again contributing to the homeliness and comfortable atmosphere that Camp fostered. This really allowed us to get to know guests better (and to taste some of the amazing food cooked by Naeem and Monu, the camp chefs).

Orlando

Perhaps the greatest surprise and certainly a bulk of my fondest memories at Camp, lie with the Camp dog, Orlando. Having only arrived at Camp as a puppy, a month or so prior to my arrival, without my knowledge, Orlando was as new to Camp as we were. Kipling has, again, due to the Wrights' fondness of dogs, always had a Camp mascot. Therefore, one of our most important jobs it fell to us to love, accompany and look after him. He was adorable

and it really was unique to be able to bring up a golden retriever in the Indian jungle. The only downside was saying goodbye when I left! I must add, despite the dangers of growing up in a jungle inhabited by tigers and leopards, Orlando flourished and I still miss him hugely.

The staff

As previously mentioned, Kipling has about 16 members of local staff, whom it really cherishes. Despite living separately to the volunteers, both James and I became very close to particular members of the staff. Essentially, the staff know how to make Camp function properly, and was our job to absolutely make sure everything was done (essentially a redundant job, unless they take issue with the manager on a particular year...). They work hugely hard and do expect you to work hard too, even if there isn't something obvious to get on with (something which I found tricky, particularly early in the season!).

Afternoons with Tara

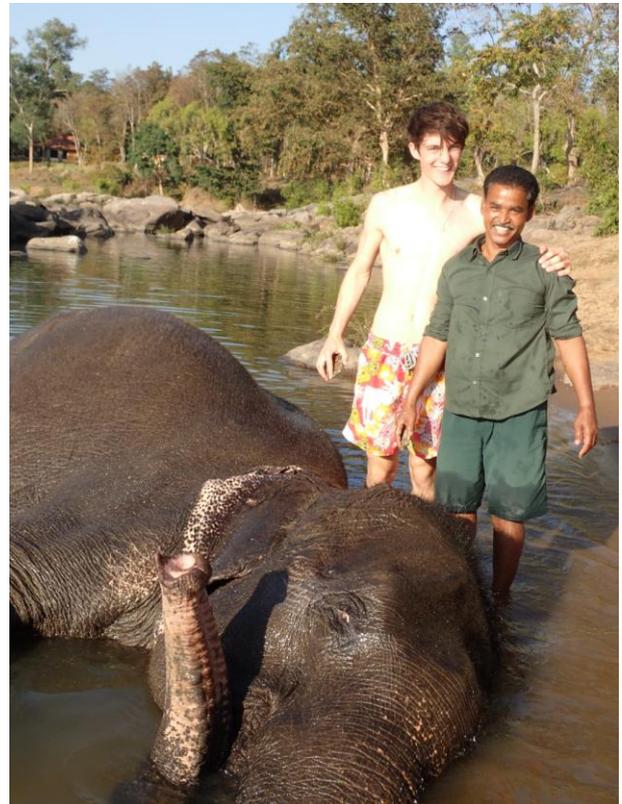
Running down to the river with Tara when there were no guests at Camp enabled me not only to get some much-needed exercise (for future volunteers, making sure you actually stay a little active alongside all the curry and safaris is something I really recommend!), but to spend some time, individually, with Tara. Reading by a river with an elephant bathing in front of you- with only the Mahuts (Tara's elephant keepers) for company, is again, a unique experience and one I will never forget.

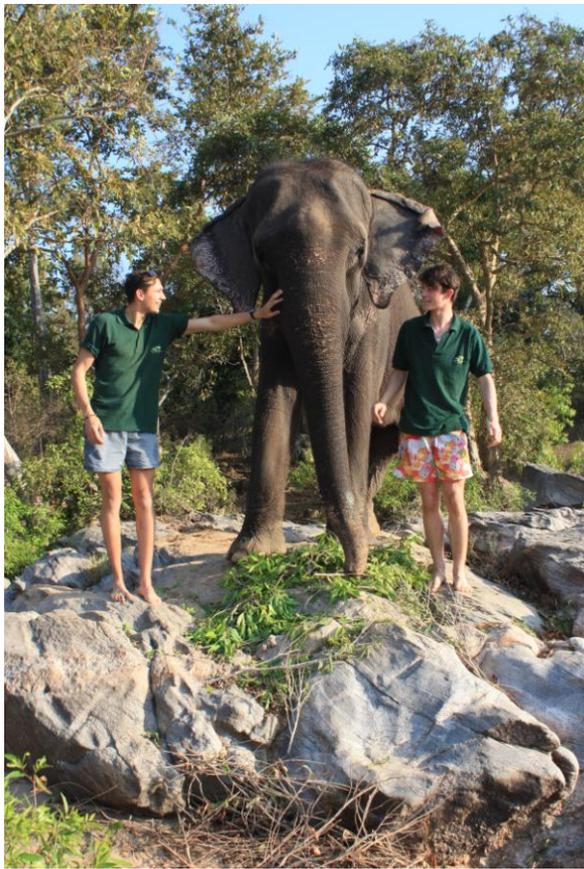
Managing Camp

For the final week of Kipling, it was fairly quiet and both James and Henry left, leaving me responsible for the Camp accounts. Managing the Camp was certainly made easier by the help of Raghu, the Assistant Manager, but it was an interesting experience all the same. Certainly, the atmosphere of Camp changed somewhat after Henry left!

Difficulties at Camp

Kipling was not always easy. It is isolated- being a few hours from the nearest town, Mandla, by car, this being very much being a local enclave and not anything other than an Indian town. Particularly with difficulties at home, I found periods of my time away hugely challenging- especially when trying to host guests, battling with personal upset is tricky! For me it was a trip of extreme emotions. For me it was the times when camp was quiet which I found particularly difficult.





Sometimes it was more extraordinary than words can give justice to, others were harder and, at times, lonely and isolating. There were also aspects of the social dynamics of Camp which I found particularly difficult. However, the staff at Kipling, Belinda and James, were some of the kindest people I have ever met.

The guests I received at Kipling, despite their short stays, had a profound and wonderful impact on my time in India too. I have even managed to keep in touch with some and hope to visit some in the future! Despite being their hosts, many of the guests realised that we were both young and for the most part, were actually working incredibly hard on their behalf.

Lessons learnt and looking back

I have the warmest memories of my time at Kipling. I cannot reiterate enough- it was a magical, unforgettable experience and I learnt a huge amount during my time away. It taught me a huge amount about myself and I loved meeting so many varied and interesting people as part of daily life. Working in the hospitality industry- seeing the "other side" of things makes you think about things a little differently too!

Immersing myself in a different culture for such a prolonged period of time in such a comfortable environment is perhaps the most valuable aspect of my experience of Kipling. I have always wanted to spend time living in India and Kipling allowed me to achieve that. Certainly, travelling for nearly five months after finishing at Kipling would have been hugely more intimidating had I not been so settled at Kipling.

I wish I could do it all over again- as there are things I would do differently. Appreciating how extraordinary an opportunity it is at the time was difficult and I do regret having not immersed myself even more at times. Certainly, learning to cook Indian food (as the food at Kipling really is fabulous) from the cooks would have been very special. Kipling is what you make of it, as Belinda always reminded me, and I think I would always have come away wishing I had done differently: perhaps this is just an element of the experience.

Tips for future volunteers

It sounds like a strange thing to suggest, but fully immerse yourself in the experience. Do not go with a girlfriend or any attachment back home, which will hold you back from you being entirely present during your time away, not just for Kipling! I made this mistake (and so did a volunteer from the earlier slot) and in hindsight, I hugely regret not having made

(even) more of my time there. There is WiFi, but as best you can, avoid using it as again, in retrospect, it prevented me from completely immersing myself in the experience!

Take warm clothes- although you are in India, even in the later slot, Kanha is *freezing* in the mornings. Gloves, a warm hat, multiple fleeces and a thick coat are pretty essential if you want to remember drives for more than the freezing temperatures! Take thermals too and definitely don't *just* take shorts. A good camera, if you are to return back home immediately after your stint, is also a very good idea.

Learn Hindi (and cooking) from the staff out there! It is certainly easier said than done, however, it is worth it. As Belinda told me, Kipling gives back what you put in twofold- go for it when you are there as you will only regret it if you don't.

Prepare to be tired. Kipling is full on. James and I never handled Camp at full capacity, but even so, at busy times, when there is only two of you doing particular tasks- you don't really stop. Have open dialogue with Belinda about things as she was hugely understanding when we did let her know how tired we were getting. This was, I think, partly because James and I were passionate about doing a good job at Camp and was therefore partially self-induced (I don't regret throwing myself into it when I did and I know James does not either).

Fin

In retrospect, I loved Kipling and it is somewhere that will always hold a warm place in my heart. It is a remarkable place, ran by remarkable people and is an experience I will never forget.

Thank you, again for enabling me this opportunity. I would also more than happily answer any questions that people might have. My email is with the Guidance Department so please ask away!

George.