> ‘If someone had told me that the best two years of my life would be spent without electricity, running water, television or cheese, I wouldn’t have believed them’

Helping hands

Cicely Brown is one of thousands of people who volunteer overseas every year. Here they explain why, and suggest how you can make a difference – from a week to a couple of years

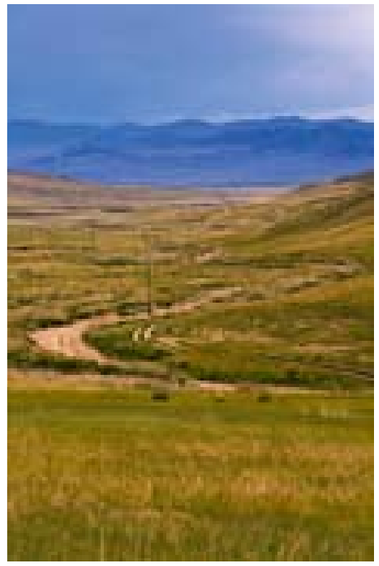
Portraits **James Clarke** Interviews **Rob Bright**

1-2 WEEKS

Help conserve wildlife in MONGOLIA with Earthwatch (www.earthwatch.org)

‘You have conversations and interactions you simply couldn’t have as a traveller’

Des Gould, Business Consultant, 55



“Earthwatch is an international environmental charity that researches ecosystems, climate change, cultural heritage, things like that, and uses a mixture of professionals and ‘citizen scientists’ to carry out its research.

The project I was part of for two weeks was in Mongolia’s Gobi desert, in a place called Ikh Nart. The great strength of being part of Earthwatch is that over the two weeks we were on the project we could do pretty much anything. We started by counting the population of argali sheep as part of a research project into pressures on the ecosystem, but we also went to a vulture’s nest and measured chicks; we looked at small mammals like gerbils and hamsters that form the main bulk of the food chain; we looked at different plant species, and so on. We had a lot of choice.

One of the great things is you’re out there in the desert and you get to talk to nomads. Of course you’ve got interpreters, but you’ve got the credibility of being part of a research group that’s been there for 10 years – you’re a known quantity, and therefore you can have conversations and interactions that you couldn’t have as a tourist or a casual traveller. That was incredibly valuable. Plus about half of the researchers were made up of Mongolian students, so there was good integration.

I remember one time being in the camp on my own as the sun went down, with a feeling of absolute peace and solitude in the desert as the night drew in. Most of Mongolia’s on a plateau about 4,000ft above sea level, and the stars you see are phenomenal. I just sat there watching shooting stars, it was fabulous.

It’s also interesting to live in a landscape where there are no fences, no boundaries, no hedges, no walls, nothing. It’s very, very strange. There is a sense of tremendous freedom, but it makes me more aware of landscapes here in the UK and the way we parcel them up.

The other thing I really liked was the feeling that you are contributing to the sum of knowledge of what we do and don’t know about some of the last remaining wild places. For example, one discovery they’ve made out here is that juvenile vultures actually migrate. They tagged them and found them as far away as Korea, about 2,000 miles away. Nobody knew that before. It’s true that what you can contribute in two weeks is limited, but it’s still something.

Earthwatch is a big organisation and they’ve got things going on all over the world, so if the Gobi desert doesn’t appeal there are bound to be places that do. There are research projects that are both more and less strenuous, so there’s something for everyone really.”

TOP TIP
GET ON THE BLOWER
Whether you’re talking to someone in communications or one of the scientists, everyone at Earthwatch is enthusiastic and willing to give their time to talk to people.

How to do it

Earthwatch expeditions are typically 1-2 weeks, and range from shark conservation in Belize to excavations in Rome. Prices (‘contributions’) range from £795 to £2,195. For more info, visit www.earthwatch.org/europe or call 01865 318838.

MORE VOLUNTEER OPTIONS IN 2 WEEKS OR LESS

With short-term volunteering, the key is to find structured projects with lasting value – a few days of ‘helping out’ is unlikely to actually help anyone unless you are part of a carefully co-ordinated bigger picture.

Take a conservation holiday

As an unskilled volunteer, you’ll be monitoring wildlife and (most usefully) providing funds to support on-site scientists. Some providers, like Earthwatch, are charities; others like Real Gap (www.realgap.co.uk) and GVI (www.gvi.co.uk) are private companies. See Bradt’s *Wildlife and Conservation Volunteering* guide (£13.99) for a full audit of providers.

Get a taste of volunteering

‘Voluntourism’ may be an ungainly phrase with a dubious image, but if you recognise that your main contribution in a few days will be financial, it can work for all parties. Hands Up Holidays (www.handsupholidays.com) offers a range of exotic trips with just ‘a taste of volunteering’, including building work and classroom assistance.

Stay close to home

Coppicing, shrub clearance, digging – the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (www.btcv.org.uk) has free projects all over the UK, many for just a day or two. Or for a fee, you can improve your gardening or drystone walling skills on a National Trust Working Holiday (www.nationaltrust.org.uk).

2 WEEKS–2 MONTHS

Teach children in ECUADOR aboard the Book Bus (www.thebookbus.org)

‘For once, we English-speakers were making a leap of faith’

Ed Stocker, Journalist, 29

“I had to admit it; I was struggling with the drink. The food had been delicious: crisp yams, rice, tuna and freshly harvested jungle potatoes. But the drink was a problem. The teachers were eagerly gazing at our table, smiling and trying to gauge the group’s reaction. I’d taken my first sip of the yellow liquid, thinking it was a delicious cup of freshly squeezed passion fruit juice. Instead, a warm, yeasty liquid stung my lips. Eager not to offend our hosts, I forced a grin and gulped down a couple more mouthfuls of the strange brew.

While our lunch might not have been to every Western palate’s taste, it felt like a real privilege being invited to eat with the community. I have the Book Bus to thank for that. Having decided to volunteer to be part of the mobile library project, I had arrived at a school in Tena, south-east of the capital Quito, and this lunch was by way of a thank you from local Ecuadorian teachers.

The Book Bus is a British-run project operating a mobile library that travels around the country with volunteers teaching in local primary schools and helping kids get excited about reading through drama, games and drawing. In a country where books are expensive – a luxury reserved for the elite – the project donates reading material to schools and fosters an interest in books often missing from the traditional teaching curriculum.

Although the bus visits areas that have a sizeable influx of tourists, the project offers a chance to see an alternative side to the country, beyond the often superficial exchanges that visitors have with locals. “I think we’ve got a lot to learn from these communities,” explained David Gordon, founder of VentureCo, who run the initiative. He was out in Ecuador ensuring the Book Bus ran smoothly in its debut year in South America. “As well as becoming aware of day-to-day issues of life in Ecuador,” he continued, “volunteers see how much things cost when they go out shopping for themselves and they see what the local people eat. It’s a real plus, because they get below the surface.”

The Book Bus was originally founded by Tom Maschler, a British publisher and founder of the Booker prize. He teamed up with VentureCo and rolled out the project in Zambia two years ago, operating a London-style bus that travels around the schools. After the success in Africa, they decided to start a project in South America. I spent a week around Tena before moving on to Puerto López on the Pacific coast. The plan is for future Book Buses to operate through the year with 12-week stints in Tena, Esmeraldas in the north, the coast around Puerto López, and the Andean region of Riobamba. Volunteers complete a minimum of two weeks volunteering but can stay as long as they like (visa restrictions allowing).

Back to school

Our days started early: waking at sunrise and eating a quick breakfast before hopping onto the Book Bus and travelling to one of the schools. Teaching began around 8am and finished at lunchtime, usually with an hour’s break at ten. The afternoon was free to explore town or, when we were on the coast, head to the beach. In my case, however, it seemed to involve stuffing myself with as much delicious Ecuadorian food as possible, mainly *patacones* (fried plantain) and *ceviche* (fish marinated in lime). ›

Ecuador up close
Volunteering with the Book Bus gives you access to places and life experiences way beyond the usual Gringo Trail

Stepping into a classroom of inquisitive kids, I hadn't expected to teach students with such familiar-sounding names. Yet here I was reading with Kevin, Wendy and Washington. Naming children after *los yanquis* is all the rage in this tiny corner of South America, and US soldiers, politicians and presidents have left a permanent mark.

The group of volunteers I worked with ranged from fresh-faced 18-year-olds on their Gap Year to 30-somethings taking a career break. Gordon said he hoped retired teachers and university students would also join the project in future years. Unlike in Zambia where English is an official language, teaching in Ecuador throws up linguistic challenges and those perhaps best suited to the voluntary work here have at least GCSE or A-Level Spanish. Yet several people in our group who'd never spoken Spanish managed to get by. The Book Bus makes sure volunteers have at least the bare rudiments of communication beforehand and optional intensive language courses can be organised in Quito, if needed.

TOP TIP
GET SOME PROPS
You're going to be teaching a classroom full of children, so think of ways to get their attention – something like a magic trick or a hand puppet.

Some struggled at first, but it was amazing both how responsive children were, despite the sometimes limited language skills of their gringo teachers, and how game volunteers were to try and communicate. Those who spoke Spanish best were entrusted with the older children whilst the most limited took the younger children where the emphasis was on games.

Kids, of course, can be a tough crowd. We were teaching children aged between five and 11 and we needed to be prepared. Books had to be picked with students' abilities in mind and, for the younger ones in particular, the more pictures the better. We soon found that *El Libro de la Selva* (*The Jungle Book*) was a particular winner, and getting the students to act out the book, complete with animal face masks, proved a big hit. Even Kevin, a shaven-headed six-year-old who liked to terrorise the other kids, settled down when we wheeled out Mowgli, Baloo and Bagheera.

But despite Kevin – and one kid who thought it was funny to paint the rear of my t-shirt with felt-tips every time my back was turned – the children were, in truth, wonderfully well behaved and welcoming. We discovered very different characters and personalities during our travels, and it was fascinating how widely schools varied. Even those a few kilometres apart had completely different traits, especially around Tena. Here the communities kept to themselves: small jungle villages of low-rise wooden shacks set around the obligatory concrete football/basketball court. Often there was only one school for the community's children, some well equipped but others seriously lacking. In Tena we were teaching indigenous communities where their first language was often kichwa.

At one school, the teacher explained, most of the children's parents spoke the indigenous language as their mother tongue, but the children now preferred to speak Spanish with each other.

Feeling like family

Shandia was my favourite school without doubt. On arrival we were swarmed by a mass of excitable kids in school uniform and showered with hugs. In fact, several of the group's young men received girlfriend propositions from a giggling chorus of girls. Wherever we went, though, teachers and students wanted to be involved and, in the case of the Puerto López schools, kids came into school especially, even though it was the holiday period. Pablo Grefa, headteacher at Bajo Ongota's school explained how the community felt. "With the overseas support," he beamed, "it's as if the children have another family!"

I returned to the cool altitude of Quito feeling touched by the reception we'd received. While it was important to help the children read and to donate books, the project had been important on so many other levels. Whether it was teaching the children an English nursery rhyme translated into Spanish or us attempting to count from one to ten in kichwa, we were sharing our cultures. One volunteer neatly summed up what made the project so special. English-speakers are used to the world falling into line with them, she said, but on the Book Bus it was the other way round. For once, we were the ones making the leap of faith.

HOW TO DO IT

The Ecuador Book Bus is currently in the Amazon, but roams around the country visiting Puerto Lopez, Esmeraldas and the Andes – to check its itinerary visit www.thebookbus.org. Other Book Buses operate in Zambia and Malawi.

Volunteer trips aboard the Book Bus start at £635 for two weeks (you can stay for up to a year), plus a local payment of US$200 (covers local transport and accommodation). International flights not included but can be arranged separately through VentureCo. To book visit www.ventureco-worldwide.com/book-bus or call 01926 411122.

Language classes in Quito are an optional add-on, from £180 per week, including accommodation and 20 hours of lessons.

MORE VOLUNTEER OPTIONS IN 2 WEEKS TO 2 MONTHS

With a bit longer to give, you can contribute more than just money and raw labour. A wider range of projects opens up, and beyond a month, teaching or classroom help is an option.

Combine travel with volunteering
Tour operator Explore (www.explore.co.uk) has just teamed up with ethical volunteer agency People and Places for a range of 'experiential tours' in India, Nepal and South Africa. Trips start at 18 days, a week of which is focused on volunteering – in Nepal, for example, you could combine visits to Kathmandu and Chitwan National Park with English coaching in a village near Tibet.

Volunteer and learn a skill
Volunteering and learning go hand in hand. You could pick up a PADI diving qualification on a marine conservation project with Blue Ventures (www.blueventures.org) or Coral Cay Conservation (www.coralcay.org), or learn wildlife tracking in Botswana with African Conservation Experience (www.conservationafrica.net)

Mentor a Kenyan entrepreneur
If you've got 5 years of business experience, you could help a Kenyan entrepreneur. Skills Venture (www.skillsventure.com) can match you with one or more small businesses who need experience in, for example, marketing, HR or finance. Mentor programmes can last from a week to several months.

2-6 MONTHS

Work with 18-24 year-olds on a project in COSTA RICA (raleighinternational.org)

Shot at Stanfords Travel Bookshop in London's Covent Garden (www.stanfords.co.uk). Photo assistant: Tom Fewell

'It doesn't take much effort to get out there and get on with it'

Sarah Elliot
Student, 34

"I volunteered to join Raleigh, a youth development organisation dealing with 18-24 year-olds. The whole point of Raleigh is to empower young people and help the local community at the same time, so they set up expeditions in places like Costa Rica, Borneo and India, and run a mixture of community and environmental projects.

I was a volunteer manager, which means I was one of the people running the expedition. My motivation for wanting to become a volunteer was two-fold, really. I'd met several people who'd been away with Raleigh and they all raved about it, saying it was literally the best thing they'd ever done in their life, so it was kind of a 100 per cent track record in terms of recommendation. Secondly, it's about breaking the cycle of this consumerist treadmill we're all on. I'm not particularly motivated by the thought of acquiring wealth, so I wanted to take a step back from all that and do something a bit more meaningful.

Raleigh is very reactive – there's little bureaucracy and paperwork involved. We're asking the local community, "What do you need?" and then we're endeavouring to provide it, whether that's installing a system to provide clean and safe water, building a school, or helping to improve the infrastructure of a national park.

I had some real 'top of the mountain' moments during my time with Raleigh. Literally at times – for example, we were trekking with a group who had been really struggling up a mountain, but then making it to the summit, and the kid that was having a tantrum at the bottom that morning was looking at you and going, "wow, this is awesome" – that's an incredible feeling.

Because of the way that Raleigh work you get access to places that you never could as a traveller – bits of national parks that are completely off limits, communities that there simply aren't transport links to. I remember waking up one morning having been camping on a beach that you wouldn't get access to as a traveller. It was just the most beautiful sunrise, and you just feel so privileged to be there.

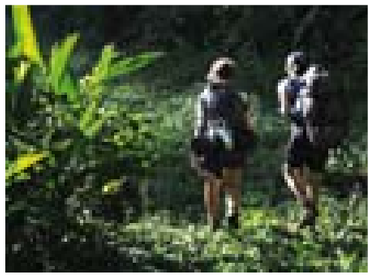
People worry that volunteering is going to look like a big holiday on their CV, but it can be quite the opposite; it can look incredibly constructive. One thing that's really exciting is that Raleigh have just launched a new Masters degree programme that means everything you do as a volunteer manager can be converted into a very real, quantifiable qualification, in my case as part of a Masters with Birkbeck University.

When you mention volunteering, some people close their eyes, order another skinny latte and forget about it, but it doesn't actually take that much effort to get out there and get on with it. It's a bit nerve-wracking to start with, but it's made me far more confident and proactive."

TOP TIP
TRY A WEEKEND
Raleigh's assessment weekends give potential volunteers a taste of what's involved – the job, the people and what to expect from three months away.

How to do it

Volunteer managers work 8 or 13 week projects in Borneo, Costa Rica, Nicaragua or India. Visit www.raleighinternational.org or call 020 7183 1270 for details.



MORE VOLUNTEER OPTIONS IN 2-6 MONTHS

With several months to spare – a career break, perhaps – you can look for a project that makes the most of your skills, and allows you to develop further. Ask lots of questions before committing.

Find a local NGO or charity
Work your contacts to find a useful project overseas: ask schools, local businesses, UK-based charities, etc. A few recommended local NGOs include Azafady (www.madagascar.co.uk), Crees Expeditions (www.crees-expeditions.com; Peruvian Amazon) and Concert Cambodia (www.concertcambodia.org).

Use your skills
Skilled volunteering isn't only for doctors, teachers and engineers: there are a huge range of vacancies for people with skills in business, IT, media, HR, fundraising, and so on. Even 'life skills' like flower-arranging and hairdressing can be useful. A reputable sending agency will find a placement to suit you: try People and Places (www.travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk).

Go direct
If you're stuck for contacts, www.independentvolunteer.org lists hundreds of free placements, but note these have not been vetted. The onus is on you to establish what you'll be doing. The website www.ethicalvolunteering.org has a useful checklist of questions to think about before you sign up.

6 MONTHS–2 YEARS

Help a non-profit business in NIGERIA achieve success (wwww.vso.org.uk)

‘It was very emotional when I finally had to leave’

Cicely Brown, Business Development Director, 44

“I was based at a Nigerian non-profit organisation called the Fantsuam Foundation in a semi-rural town called Kafanchan. One of the main aspects of the business was selling computer training to those who could afford it in order to be able to teach those who couldn’t for free. The Fantsuam Foundation had taken on volunteers from the VSO for some time and had a good working relationship with them. One thing I must stress is that the VSO doesn’t just recruit from Europe. Two of the volunteers at the Fantsuam Foundation were East Africans, so it wasn’t a lot of white people telling black people how to do business. There was complete integration, both among the volunteers and between the volunteers and local Nigerians. Everybody really pulled together. It made it very emotional when I finally had to leave.

My role, essentially, was to use my previous experience as a Business Development Director in the UK to offer advice, both for the benefit of the Fantsuam Foundation and for the village. That might involve any number of things. For example, men in the village would each arrange to send their chickens to market by separate forms of transport, so I suggested that maybe they should group together to cut their transport costs and we talked about how it might be done.

Sometimes I felt incredibly lucky in that we were able to deliver a huge amount, and in that sense I definitely feel I did make a difference. I think there was value in bringing a Western perspective and believe that having that additional resource really did help the Fantsuam Foundation.

If someone had told me that the best two years of my life would be spent without electricity, running water, television or cheese, I wouldn’t have believed them. But the ability of the average human being to survive with very little really struck me.

One thing really exemplifies life there: I spent my two years sharing a flat with another female volunteer, and at some point she had to go away on a course, and I thought to myself, “Oh, great, I’ll get the flat to myself for a week.” And yet by the second day I started to feel lonely, and when I mentioned this to a local, they said, “You know what’s happened to you? You’ve become a Nigerian.”

I couldn’t remember being unhappy in my time in Nigeria, although I should stress that my circumstances were probably a little bit exceptional – I’d spent a lot of time growing up in a number of countries abroad because my father worked for the British Council. Some people find it much tougher to adapt. But if you’re interested, have a look at the VSO website, which is great. Also, try to track down some volunteers and get them to talk about their experiences.”

MORE ONLINE
Read our online volunteering guide and previous articles at www.wanderlust.co.uk/planatrip/types-of-trip/volunteer-and-conservation

How to do it

Start by checking out the VSO’s website. Although there’s a Gap Year option, VSO is mostly looking for people with professional experience in six key areas. Simply volunteering doesn’t mean you’ll be accepted. You can register online, at which point an application will be sent to you. ■

MORE VOLUNTEER OPTIONS IN 6 MONTHS TO 2 YEARS

This is going to be life-changing – it’s likely to challenge, inspire and frustrate you in ways you cannot foresee. Ensure you use a reputable agency and have a clear vision of what you can achieve.

Use an expert placement agency
Think of your volunteer placement as applying for a job. It’s all about finding a skills fit, which is where agencies like 2 Way Development (www.2 way development.com) come in. For a fixed fee of £750, they’ll match your skills (from graphic design to police work) with vetted NGOs in Africa, Asia or Latin America. A typical 12-month placement costs a total of £3,000 (including fee).

VSO
The UK’s largest volunteer sending organisation, VSO is unique in offering a salary to its volunteers. In return, you need to seriously commit to living in the developing world – usually for 2 years. Placements typically require scientific, technical, education, health or business skills.

Humanitarian work
Aid organisations are always looking for health professionals, engineers and administrators. Medecins Sans Frontiers (www.msf.org) sends staff on emergency missions of six months to a year. In the UK, volunteering charity CSV (www.csv.org.uk) has thousands of social and environmental opportunities, both long and short term.