

Ina Luiches left on August 2005 to Delhi, India for 3 months to work for MITRA, a non profit organization with the goal is to promote voluntary work in India



Diary September 2005

It has been three weeks since I arrived in Delhi. When you get out of the plane you step into a hot oven (even at 11 pm.) and you step into a completely different world of the auto rickshaws, cows, children sleeping in the streets, poor lighting and lots of cars and scooters.

I live in an apartment in South Delhi, a 5-minute walk from the MITRA office. I share the apartment with Julie from the UK, who works for VSO. She took on the job of teaching me the basics of how to get around: do the grocery shopping, cook, wash and then left for England for 10 days.

After two days of the basic training by VSO: who is who, what do they expect from you and how do you get around in Delhi (or how to not get ripped of too much by the rickshaw drivers), I started working at MITRA. The team is nice, enthusiastic, motivated, well educated and they speak very good English (I am getting used to the accent).

One of the core activities of MITRA is to recruit volunteers. The name for this project is iVolunteer (www.ivolunteer.org.in). As expected their work process is much like Randstad's: interview volunteers, check motivation, find a project, assess the needs and make the match. We don't need to do the weekly declarations, but here too people don't show up for work, are the jobs different from the prescription and are the volunteers happy with their jobs and the projects happy with the volunteers.

I followed two volunteers who are in marketing school and want to get more experience in the field of marketing. They have been placed at a project where disabled people work in the daytime. The director wants to create some new products and activities and the students are going to help with the marketing plan. I think it is the perfect match.

Meanwhile I have been able to dig into the organization itself. In total there are 15 employees working in 5 offices, rather small so to say. The level of ambition is enormous and the large-scale thinking reflects this. Different names for a job that resembles the job of a consultant is not very useful, in my opinion. You might give the impression that there are plenty of career opportunities, but new employees don't need much time to find out it is only window-dressing. This could result in a staff turnover.

The biggest challenge is how to manage the growth of this organization. Mitra is founded by three men in their thirties, who started this project some years ago in university. They are very creative: they think up new projects all the time; their focus is externally oriented: they are good at fundraising and finding new partners: and they are very ambitious: they want the organization to be 10 times as big in 2 years time. This is all very inspiring and enthusing, but... this means a growing need for managing internal processes. There is a need for more organization, more attention to internal process, more formal information and communication. Staff are expecting more guidance, attention and appreciation.

It is all very familiar to me, where have I seen it before?

Because of the visit that Ben Noteboom made to MITRA everyone knows Randstad and the examples I use from my Randstad experience are received enthusiastically. Furthermore it is mainly using my common sense, listening hard and showing appreciation for everything they have accomplished so far. I can use all of my energy and experience here.

The time outside of work I spend mostly with other volunteers and my colleagues from Mitra. We go to the movies, listen to Indian music and shop. I also went to Jaipur over the weekend by train: a beautiful city, very crowded, lots of hustle and bustle, cows, camels and elephants in the streets. All of the clichés I had in my head about India appeared to be true! This weekend I will be selecting volunteers: 28 Indians are up for an assessment to see if they are suitable to work abroad as a volunteer. I am very curious!

October 12, 2005

The interviews have been finished, the bottlenecks are clear and we have made a plan to improve these points. Comparing iVolunteer with Randstad has given us a lot of inspiration. Working with the units, the job descriptions and responsibilities of the consultant, working from your core values and the big focus on quality, market and market development. Only four weeks to go to implement these things in iVolunteer.

Not the easiest phase. How do I make change attractive? What fits this organization and what doesn't? What has to be done now and what can wait till later? How do I get the management enthusiastic and how do I make the employees feel at ease with the changes? How do I implement all the input I have received? Tomorrow I will give the first presentation for the management: exciting!

Meanwhile I have been in Mumbai for a week. Just like Delhi it is warm, crowded, there is lots of traffic and so many scents. But some things are different. The English colonial history is more recognizable in the buildings, the city is more of an international metropolis and because of skyscrapers and the sea, it reminds me of New York. In the parks everyone plays cricket: the national sport.

The most exciting part of the day is the trip to work by train. The most important question is how to get on the train. Pushing, pulling and yelling are the most effective patterns of behavior. I didn't use them for long, but these skills come in very handy. My most important battle companion is my laptop. I'm probably not the only one who gets off the train with bruises. Fortunately the struggle takes place in the 'Ladies Only' compartment. I had a hunch when I saw that every train has several of these compartments and unfortunately not because of religious motifs. It must be less bad to be run over by a herd of colorful saris, but I can't compare it since I didn't try the mixed compartment.

My business outfit (high heels, linen trousers and a blouse) leads a poor and lonely life in my closet. Teva flip-flops, jeans and a t-shirt are more suitable as (combat) gear.

In the middle of the pushing and pulling there are all kinds of things being sold: earrings, necklaces, combs, books, curlers and washing-up brushes. Everything to make sure you won't run out of them in the office. Every once and a while there is some cheerful drumming and singing even though it's not performed by the best artists.

The last challenge is how to get of the train in time. Hindi writing is not my specialty, but so far I managed every time.

Tomorrow night I take the train back to Delhi. 18 hours of conversation with other passengers about the enormous changes in the country, lots of reading and some sleep.

After next week I will visit every branch to talk about the proposed changes and to prepare the workshop we planned for December. Which means more train kilometers and train nights. By now I purchased so many books that I can pass my time without problems and every train has electricity so my laptop and mp3 player won't run out of power.

Despite the many challenges I still do my job with pleasure and energy. The last weeks are the most exciting: Will I get on the plane feeling I was really able to establish something?

November 5, 2005

The last few weeks were intense, tiresome and because of the bombings very disturbing. A strange idea that I had been chatting in one market and when I got home found out that there had been a bombing in a market like that one just a few kilometers away, where so many people got killed or were wounded. So close and yet so far away.

Since last weekend there have been armed militants at bus stations and markets. The tensions between Pakistan and India have been in the constant attention of the media and politics.

My own work is humble compared to these enormous problems, but are my daily reality. In Bangalore, Mumbai and Delhi the suggested changes have been received very well. Together we worked hard to make it as concrete as possible. Gradually everyone starts to realize that it is not the external consultant who carries out the changes, but that it is the responsibility of every employee and manager. For me it will be the art of letting go, pass on the knowledge to others and say goodbye.

I met lots of enthusiastic volunteers: In Mumbai student who play games with disabled children every two weeks. In Bangalore young IT specialist who play with their bands to raise money and cheer up sick children's lives. In Delhi experienced managers who go to South Africa for two years. For me it was very special to work with these people.

It was special too to be part of iVolunteer. A group of driven and enthusiastic people who try to contribute to a better world and who work with passion.

Saying goodbye is hard. I will miss the colleagues. No more lunches together during which everyone eats from each other's plates and comments on the food. The food of Jyolsna's mother in law is especially praised. Also the people in the streets have become a part of my social life. The girl that irons my clothes under a primitive roof, the security guard, the woman who collects the garbage, the milkman, the fruit and vegetables salesmen, the paperboy, who throws the newspaper on my balcony on the second floor. Next Sunday there will be no more yelling in the streets to collect old newspapers, to come see the monkeys or to buy broomsticks and brushes.

There are also a lot of things I will not miss. Just getting a train ticket from the machine instead of having to put on a show and walk away from the auto rickshaw three times, pretending to be offended, until the price seems reasonable. No more hand-washing because the maid throws everything in one bucket and her caste doesn't wash underwear anyways. Just get fresh vegetables and good wine from the supermarket and no need to buy beer secretly. No more mud up to your ankles, no more temperatures that make it impossible to perform sports or even sleep.

Just communicate in Dutch and no more need to call Seema to explain to the maid or the auto rickshaw what I mean. And no more nights without electrical power, reading with a flashlight or going to bed early. Holland sounds so boring, but being honest I really long for it.

I have started packing and cleaning out the apartment. The load of books will be sent by mail. The curtains, bed sheets and kitchen aids will go to iVolunteer to be given to the next volunteer. The presents have to go in the suitcase. The leftovers of rice, lentils, herbs, tea and coffee are for the maid. My Indian clothes are for my colleagues.

I have learned and seen a lot, met a lot of people and worked hard. Did I contribute anything? I think so. To make the farewell a little easier: I will be coming back to India, hopefully to do an evenly as exciting and challenging job.

Ina Luichies