

VSO Volunteers



Newsletter

We are **Phil and Sabine from Stamford in Lincolnshire, England.** Sabine was a teacher in a rural comprehensive school and I worked in a Pupil Referral Unit in Peterborough. We were both up for a change of scenery and a challenge so we first applied to VSO in January 2008.

We hadn't discussed volunteering really. I was off work with a broken leg so spent many an hour surfing the web. One day I happened on a website that prompted me to search for volunteering orgs. The rest as they say is history. Here we are in deepest, darkest China.

We landed in Beijing on Feb 23rd and stayed there, visiting the PO each day for a variety of briefings and info. During our spare time we visited Tiananmen Sq. and were in great demand to be included in photographs!

Our final day in Beijing was free so we decided to visit Chángchéng (The Great Wall). Following a tube ride across the sprawling capital, we discovered there were no tour buses to the Wall that day. As we were standing there contemplating our dilemma, some Westerners approached us and explained that they were planning the same visit. The upshot was we all hired a minibus and travelled to Simatai. We had a great day and took some stunning shots with our fellow travellers. However we were late returning to Beijing and almost missed the night train to Xian!

In Xian we studied Chinese for 6 hours a day - a tad too intensive!. On the Wednesday this hard study was punctuated by a chilly sojourn to see The Terracotta Army. One of ur newly appointed NVs accompanied all 5 new volunteers and translated as necessary.

Following the 2 day VSO annual conference in Xian, we journeyed North-West to Zifeng (Qingyang Prefecture) in Gansu province by car - the headmaster of the local school had attended the VSO conference and agreed to transport us 'home'.

We are settling in well with lots of help from the NVs - they are invaluable!



Hi,

I'm **Judith Fields**, newly arrived in Xian, and working for the Shaanxi Western Development Federation. I'm here to help with a volunteering program and setting up a network for Shaanxi Province NGOs who work with all kinds of disabled children. I will be helping with program management, and anything else that needs doing.

This is my second VSO tour; was recently in Kathmandu. I'm from California and I take no responsibility for Arnold Schwargenegger. (likely misspelled his name)

Judith

I'm **Astrid Ruud from Norway** – now based in Tanchang (Dangchang) in Gansu and feeling at home here. I worked with VSO for 4 years in the 90's (Baise/Bose in Guangxi and Kashgar/Kashi in Xinjiang). I'm a teacher and have always been very interested in education. My job title is English Education Adviser. I'll work partly in No1 Middle School and partly for the Education Bureau in this county. So far I'm in No1 all the time and there's plenty to do with 52 classes, 26 English teachers and almost 3000 students. Still I'd like to work with the primary schools and junior middle schools scattered around. Leandra Lok is in the same situation – patiently waiting for the EB while spending her time in the Experimental School. I really appreciate Leandra and Andrew's company. They are easygoing people and I hope we can join forces to improve basic education here.

Regarding my accommodation: I'm staying in a hotel waiting for the new teachers' building to be completed. I suppose it will take a while yet – only a few teachers have moved in.

Tanchang is 1700 metres above sea-level with very steep hillsides looking dry and barren. Last Sunday I went for a long walk away from the town. I was able to look down on a lot of terraced farmland, and it was green! Another great surprise was to see the many almond trees opening into blossom. They are scattered around everywhere just cheering me up.

Well, there are also hard times in life. Today I met one of the Engl. teachers on her way to her father's grave. He died suddenly in January due to alcoholism. They have to plant a tree before the Tomb Sweeping Day. She said she wanted to cry, but she could not together with her mother by the grave. "But weeping together is good for you," I said sounding very wise.

"Weeping by the grave means bad luck," she replied and I just realised that I still don't know Chinese culture.

Hoping this finds all of you healthy and enjoying spring,
from Astrid



My flat will be in the white building on the right.

Tessa

I have been in Nanhua County in Yunnan for the last 3 weeks and am working as an HIV Programme Development Advisor. I am here with Eric (Zhou Jia) who is a National Volunteer who is my interpreter, flat mate, colleague and friend so we are slowly finding our feet in this strange new world! The town we are in is called Longchuang (not to be confused with Longchuang County near the Manymar border), and has a population of around 230,000 and seems to be quite a main transport hub. It has a Lang Cang River beer brewery and farms tobacco across the county, it is also famous for its mushrooms for which we are looking forward to the well talked about Mushroom season and festival in July/August.

I am a nurse from Brighton in the UK and I have been working in HIV and Sexual Health in the NHS for the last 8 years, so whilst I hope to be able to use some of my experience effectively, I have got a lot to learn about the local health system and the HIV program here in Yunnan. I am currently trying to gather as much information as possible about the local health service provision, what has already taken place locally in the way of HIV training and awareness raising and generally get a feel for the local area and its community.

The people living around us have been incredibly welcoming even if a bit frustrated on both sides at my very limited Mandarin but it's amazing how you can get by with only a few words and lots of smiling. I am managing to find my way around the market with a lot of pointing and halving motions - I still end up coming away with too much of some things and not enough of others but eating well!

We have a long weekend here for the national holiday for Respecting the Dead and one of the other volunteers from the adjoining Mouding county is coming to visit so I've got that Bank Holiday/Friday feeling today!

Hope all is good with you up in Gansu -have a great weekend

Best Wishes

Tessa

Tilly

I've been in Shanyang for 6 months now and I can happily say that i'm settled here. I'm trying to enjoy myself as much as possible because I know that it'll only be a couple of months before I have to leave my placement and my work with VSO, for good. Coming to Shanyang was a challenge for me, a very small town and a new placement partnership between the Education Bureau and VSO. I was aware that nothing really would have been established except for perhaps, expectations. All in all I'm pleased with the way things have turned out, I've been looked after well, I've made a very good friend here which, i'm sure you'll all agree, is a bonus when living in the middle of nowhere! Most importantly I think the bureau's first experience working with a foreigner has left them pleasantly surprised and with positive vision for future collaboration with VSO.

So... is it mission accomplished?

I'd like to think so, but I do worry that what has been created in Shanyang may fall by the wayside if VSO UK/Holland and co. continue to have difficulties recruiting new volunteers, as is the case at the moment. I also think if prospective vols had more information about placements, job-wise and lifestyle-wise it would provide them with a true picture of China and realistic expectations.

Before I leave I plan write a little paragraph about the different aspects of life in Shanyang, from my flat, the food, what to do, and the job itself with lots of photos of those smiling middle school students. I plan to post this document in the Shanyang section, on the website Kester has set up about VSO's work here (<http://www.bechina.weebly.com/>), in the hope that it will better inform and maybe even inspire others to come and have their VSO experience here in China.

If anyone else wishes to do the same then go for it, all it needs is a word document and some photos...

Tilly



Tilly

Hello!

It has been an exciting time in Shangzhou with the arrival of new volunteer Erin! Dave (my husband) and I always had a sneaking suspicion that there was a bar somewhere in Shangzhou but could never find one..... until Erin arrived! I have enjoyed having someone else to work with and am hoping to create links between Erin's school and Shangluo College. This way my methodology students can observe some lessons and do a bit of teaching practice before they are sent off on their month long teaching practice. Dave has been busy this semester teaching oral English and getting creative with the wok. I have attached a picture of me doing a demonstration lesson for 60+ children and, what seemed like, nearly as many adults!

Kim Henderson (Shangluo College, Shangzhou)



What's happening in Tanchang? (Leandra & Andrew)

This few months I was busy trying to get a training done. In the First Semester, I visited all the teachers of my Middle school and based on the things I saw, I could give a training. With my headmaster we decided we would give this training in December, after the First Semester (in Tanchang, the semester ended very early, because of the government decided to give a longer Spring break because of the Earthquake). Just before Christmas, I realized all teachers would be free from 27th of December, which meant my training didn't go on... When I asked the headmaster about it, he said "the Education Bureau didn't decide yet"... We went on a wonderful holiday and would be back the 15th of February, because probably I could have my training before the start of the Second Term. Grade 9 started earlier, so the chance to give my training was gone... To make a long story short: they asked me to do the training from 16.00-17.00 in the afternoon and although I didn't like the short time, I wanted to give the training... I was really happy to finally be able to begin and in the same week I got stuck (for the first time in my life!!) with lower back pain!! I can't go up or down and are bored on the couch... There is something about this training....

One thing that kept me going the last months was the enthusiasm in which my translators work with me. One of them is working with the project of the Government to send good teachers to the rural area. And although she studied Finance, her English is very good. She likes more to work in that area and even asked the Tanchang government to help her find another job. On the other hand, she said "I don't want to work anywhere else, because I learn so much from you"! That makes everything worthwhile, isn't it?

We've got company here in Tanchang! Astrid has come here and I would like to add to her story that it's going to be nice to work together! The Education bureau was not very busy with me... and now we are together, they can't look over us anymore and need to figure out why they hired us! So: welcome to Tanchang Astrid, it's nice to have you here!

Erin

Profile: I have been in placement at Shangluo Primary School, Shaanxi Province for just three weeks. The welcome I've received from everyone here has been so warm it's gone a long way to make up for the sub-zero temperatures that met me on arrival in China! Every day I learn something new about this fascinating country and now that Spring is here there's the opportunity to get out of the city and up into the mountains where the air is clear and the scenery gorgeous.

Towering mountains; pink blossom on the trees; blue sky; the occasional red splash of a lantern; warm sunshine and sparkling water ... so much to enjoy!

Hope that will do for now - may have more to say as time goes on!

Best wishes

Erin



It is so nice to read your story's

Message from the editor

Last time in December there was a lot of response for the newsletter. It was (and is!) great fun to put it together. The only thing is, it exists because of your input. And this time the input wasminimal.
I would like to thank all participants of this newsletter for their time to write something.

I really do understand that everyone is very busy, or doesn't have an easy access to the internet, but it is so nice to read your story's!

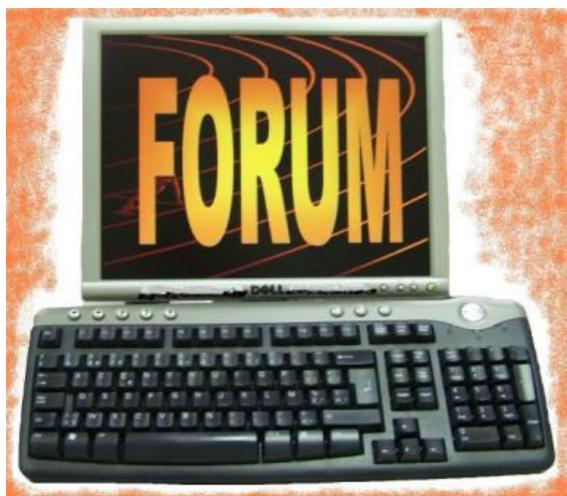


Specially for Judith.....

At the conference in Xi'An The VLG thought that it would be nice to have a possibility to share information. They also felt there is a need to ask questions, or share ideas. Now that possibility is created! I made a forum where you can put your questions and ideas, so it will be more easy to find answers. You can help each other by participating in this forum.

The only thing you have to do is:
SUBSCRIBE!
Go to: <http://vsochina.forum2go.nl/>

There are 9 participants now. I hope soon there will be a lot more.



There are already some questions on the forum: so take a look!