

How it all began: I had visited India once before. I spent 4 weeks at a CISV-camp in Lucknow at the age of 12, making new friends and expanding horizons. Although, I didn't get to see much of the cultural heritage since I spent most of my time in a building belonging to the City Montessori School. Despite this, I was wildly fascinated by the Indian culture and population. Hence, when my mom suggested that we would make another visit, I was thrilled.

In October last year, we managed to squeeze in 10 vacation days to see the wonderful state of Rajasthan. Traveling by train and car, we got to see Udaipur, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Jaipur, Agra and Delhi, although our tight schedule only allowed us to stay for one or two nights. Therefore we came to Jaipur exhausted from looking at temples and walking in ancient forts ("palaced out" as my mom said), and we were more than excited to have some relaxation time out on the countryside at Savista.

We had the joy to go on the "Camel cart-ride" and visit some families in Sanjharia. I noticed the effects on snapchat being a good icebreaker with the children, and was soon surrounded by laughter.



We came back to Savista and had a long chat with our lovely hosts and after showing pictures and talking for a while I happened to get the question if I wanted to come back and do volunteer work. With my newfound love for Rajasthan and my dream of volunteering I thought the answer was obvious. Ofcourse I got time to think but at the time we got to Agra (8 hours later) I was so excited to begin this new adventure. Although, it took some time. The project was about womens' empowerment and the target group was girls in their early teens. Through martial arts, gymnastics and dance I would, for two months, boost these girls in their bodies as well as their self-esteem. So first of all, I had to learn martial arts. I went back to Sweden and during my last year in high school, between schoolwork and other commitments, I also focused on the art of self-defence. I had practiced gymnastics for ten

years of my childhood and spent two years teaching it to small children, so luckily for me, I just had to learn some martial arts.

On the 15th of August it was time for me to leave Sweden, and after an eighteen-hour journey I had finally arrived at Savista.

I quickly became a part of the family ("the baby"), and after two days of rest I got to meet the girls. The misunderstandings in communication as well as the fact that we were strangers to one another made it a bit hard in the beginning, but after just 2 days I felt like I knew all of these girls inside and out. We had so much fun together and one of the first things I realised by being here was how far a smile and an open mind can get you when being introduced to a different culture.

The classes were set up in an easy and fun way. We started with a warm-up and muscle strength such as push-ups, sit-ups, squats, and followed with different exercises of gymnastics and self-defence and later on stretches. After that it was "fun-time", which was mostly spent listening to Bollywood-songs (that used half the space on my phone) and dancing your head off. Seeing these girls having that much fun really touched me and I quickly became very close to them.

That is why it was so extremely heartbreaking for me when some of the girls stopped showing up, and I found out the reason behind it was that fathers or brothers had pulled them out since "they might get ideas".

It is hard to witness a society where men has such control over the women in their lives, especially when my homecountry has the benefit of being one of the most gender-equal countries in the world. Although, there's not much I can do about it, and if I would keep moping around it wouldn't have made a difference either way, but it was (and still is) extremely frustrating when this led to me not being able to meet some of the girls again. Sadly, we went from being thirteen girls one day to four the other, but I carried on with these four and they seemed to enjoy my presence until the very last day.



When I wasn't busy with the girls, I spent my time photographing birds and plants and having the retreat of my life. I am quite sure no one else has ever experienced a volunteer trip like I have, since I've gotten two months of a dreamish vacation as well. It has been educational on so many levels, all from learning a little bit of Hindi to being able to understand and appreciate a culture much different from my own. I've built close relationships with my lovely host-parents (also known as my Indian ma and pa) and with some of the staffmembers. Relationships with the kind of love I didn't think was possible to achieve in just two months. I have put all my energy and love into this project and these people, and leaving will be harder than I ever imagined.

Tomorrow is my last day in this magical land, and after building new and amazing relationships and falling in love with the village, I dread the thought of going back to Sweden. I will bring back hundreds of memories (as well as jewelry and other gifts from the girls) and I will surely never EVER forget about this place.

