



# Addventure path leads to ESOL Home Tutors

A trip to Cambodia made Dunedin woman Tess Edwards determined to return home and try to make a difference. **Claire Giblin**

**T**he path she chose was to train as an ESOL home tutor. "It came purely out of my Cambodia experience. When I came home I thought 'What can I do?' and that (training as a tutor) seemed a logical thing."

Mrs Edwards travelled to Cambodia this year with Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA), on a two week *AddventureVSA* trip that combined sightseeing with living and working in a small community. She was part of a group of 14, which included her daughter Stephanie.

At 72, she was the oldest traveller, but has never been one to let age slow her down. "It hasn't stopped me doing the things I really want to do."

A former secondary school English teacher, she taught full-time until she was 64, and then carried on teaching part-time and taking relieving positions for many years.

"I genuinely enjoyed it and I miss the kids."

Mrs Edwards is thrilled to be teaching again through ESOL Home Tutors, and is full of praise for the comprehensive training she received, the advice and resources supplied for lessons and the keen and friendly volunteers in her group.

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She completed her training in April. When her first two Chinese learners left Dunedin after a few lessons, she was delighted to be given another couple to start work with. "It's wonderful to be able to feel you can help people in New Zealand."

Mrs Edwards had always wanted to work with VSA to help others, but family obligations made the usual one- or two-year commitment impossible, so when her daughter

suggested the two week *AddventureVSA* trip, it seemed the perfect opportunity.

"The idea of going away for a fortnight and doing something useful was most appealing."

There were Cambodian refugees in one of the schools she'd taught in previously, so Mrs Edwards knew something of the country before signing up, but says VSA gave her a whole new understanding.

Volunteer Service Aboard is a New Zealand-based, not-for-profit agency that has been working in Africa, Asia and the Pacific for 45 years.

It launched the *AddventureVSA* trips in 2006 because it saw a need to cater for travellers who wanted a short holiday, yet wanted to travel responsibly and be involved with the community they visited.

Most travellers fundraise to cover the cost of the trip, which includes a donation to VSA to support its work in the country being visited. ▶



The *AddventureVSA* trips have been so successful that VSA has just expanded the itinerary to include more countries, with trips planned to Papua New Guinea, Tanzania and Lao PDR (Laos).

The trips are lead by Gecko Trails, a Nelson-based company specialising in ethical, small-group travel. It uses the local knowledge and contacts of tour leader Jennie Wilson, who has worked in Cambodia with VSA, to take travellers off the beaten track.

The links gave them a wonderful entree into the community, says Mrs Edwards.

Her group lived with a family in Takeo, a rural area just south of Phnom Penh, and carried out community projects at Moy Sophea – a large secondary school.

They worked with the school's eco-club; fencing a garden to be used for horticulture training, creating a compost area, painting a colourful mural designed by the children and helping find solutions for the copious piles of litter.

And with her teaching background, Mrs Edwards was able to help in the classroom.

*AddventureVSA* encourages trained ESOL teachers to use their skills to help students and teachers at the schools visited.

"People in Cambodia value education enormously and are a pleasure to be able to help," she says.

Far left: Students at Moy Sophea where Tess' group worked. Left: The group painting a mural at Moy Sophea – with the help of the school's eco-club. Above: Students at Moy Sophea, with the books brought over by the group.

The education system has been rebuilt after the Khmer Rouge's four years of cultural genocide, during which up to an estimated two million people perished.

Today the schools are simple, with blackboards, chalk and a few books almost the only resources for teachers.

The level of poverty in Cambodia was shocking, says Mrs Edward, and was really brought home by a trip to the Stung Meanchey rubbish dump, just outside Phnom Penh.

"It was like one of the levels of Dante's inferno. The stench was appalling. The air was clouded with drifts of smoke from smouldering rubbish, and in amongst this were men, women and children hunting for whatever they could find that was sellable or reusable. It was quite heart wrenching."

They went straight from there to an orphanage, where the children were obviously well cared for and happy. "That was a hopeful place."

The group brought books with them to give to the secondary school and some were donated to

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Stung Meanchey rubbish dump

the orphanage, which had a very meagre library.

The group also visited NGOs (non-government organisations) working in the community, and Mrs Edwards was struck by the Cambodians' capacity to work and help themselves.

"Cambodia is fascinating and they are amazingly friendly and charming people."

Mrs Edwards laughs when asked if she'd like to return. "I'd be off like a shot."

Such a trip is unlikely though, and Mrs Edwards retains her links with the country through the organisation Books for Cambodia.

It was set up by tour leader Jennie Wilson to establish libraries and then provide books for schools in Takeo. The organisation relies on donations to carry out its work and Mrs Edwards

AddventureVSA:  
[www.vsa.org.nz](http://www.vsa.org.nz)

Gecko Trails:  
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Books for Cambodia:  
[www.booksforcambodia.org](http://www.booksforcambodia.org)

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is among its many supporters.

Making a difference is important to Mrs Edwards, who in addition to her work with ESOL Home Tutors, is also a volunteer with Super Grans; an organisation that aims to team up mature volunteers with young families, to pass on a range of life skills. ■

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