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BROADENING THEIR HORIZONS: Dave Parfitt, 16, right, models a souvenir coolie hat with fellow Nayland College students who have returned from a recent class trip to Cambodia.

Trip to Cambodia life-changing

By Marcus Stickle

A group of Nayland College students say a two week trip to Cambodia visiting aid projects in the struggling country has changed their lives.

"The poverty never leaves you," says Alison Paton, the teacher who accompanied 13 Nayland students, and one from Taranaki, on the two week trip.

Several students had never been outside of New Zealand before they left last month.

Each student had to raise \$3500 to go on the trip and the group donated a further \$1600 to seven different aid projects including schools, an orphanage and a hospital which they visited.

The students also helped build a house for a family whose father had fallen ill.

They saw the extreme poverty in Cambodia, visiting people living in a rubbish dump in the capital Phnom Penh and others living in a village where they struggled to grow rice.

Some poor Cambodians they met had copper streaks in their hair from malnutrition.

Paige Bowler-Brendt, 16, said the trip made her appreciate "what we've got compared to what they've got".

The group visited Teuol Sleng, a former school turned into a prison by the Khmer Rouge to torture intellectuals and others who opposed them.

Since the regime was deposed in 1979 the building has been left as a museum complete with faded splatters of blood on the walls.

Most students left the museum with tears running down their faces, having heard the personal story of one of the museum's guides who had

lived through the horror of losing family during the Khmer Rouge's reign.

The students said the country was still recovering from that period but they were impressed by Cambodians' resilience.

Bronwyn Ewers, 17, said Cambodia had something that New Zealand had lost.

"They've got that closeness of community."

For many of the students the trip has changed or reinforced what they want to do when they leave school.

Kayleigh Shaw, 18, had planned to go to Europe when she finished school but she now wants to return to South East Asia to do volunteer work.

Money went further in helping other people there, she said.