

Adventure education in Cambodia

Picture a rundown classroom of 40 to 50 kids eager to learn. Your only resource is blackboard and chalk and a few scruffy books in the library.

This is daily teaching in Cambodia as seen through the eyes of Blenheim secondary school teacher Dianne Wilson.

"The classrooms just left me stunned. They had so little."

Dianne, who teaches history at Westmount School, travelled to Cambodia with Volunteer Service Aboard (VSA), on a two week Addventure VSA trip that focused on responsible tourism; mixing sight-seeing with living and working in a village. Her daughter Fiona McDonald, a teacher in Christchurch, travelled with her.

Their group of 14 lived with a family in Takeo, a rural area south of Phnom Penh, and carried out community projects at the local 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.

Dianne also helped in the classrooms, providing conversational, informal help with English.

"The kids were very enthusiastic for education. The ones that came up and spoke to us all had high hopes for their futures and sometimes it broke your heart wondering if they would be able to do it."

It was Dianne's daughter Fiona who encouraged her to do the trip, knowing of her long held desire to work with VSA.

VSA is a New Zealand-based, not-for-profit agency that has been



Teaching on the wild side: Blenheim teacher Dianne Wilson (right) and her daughter Fiona McDonald travel via elephant in Cambodia.

working in Africa, Asia and the Pacific for 45 years.

It launched its "Addventure" trips in 2006 because it saw a need from travellers who wanted a short holiday, yet wanted to travel responsibly. Most travellers fund-raise to cover the cost of the trip, which includes a donation to VSA to support its work in the country being visited.

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

The trips are lead by Gecko Trails and tour leader Jennie Wilson uses knowledge gained through working in Cambodia with VSA to take travellers off the beaten track.

"It was a brilliant trip, probably the best I have ever done. It had a depth you can't get on your own. Gecko Trails had great contacts and made it very personal."

During the trip there were many

shocking reminders of Cambodia's poverty and of the brutal reign of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979.

"The remnants of Pol Pot were everywhere from the horrendous roads in the north to the burnt out houses in the south — not to mention the mine victims and killing fields," Dianne said.

They visited Tuol Sleng, a former school turned prison where more than 17,000 people were imprisoned and tortured. They travelled to a stinking 100-acre rubbish dump outside Phnom Penh, where whole families eked a living. "It was the end of the world. It was just shocking," she said.

The same day they went to an orphanage where the children, while happy and well cared for, seemed to have so little. "That made me cry; the little kids were grabbing our hands, just wanting a hand to hold."

The group donated books they had brought with them to the secondary school and the orphanage.

Through it all Dianne was struck by the resilience of the people who were cheerful and friendly.

The experience has made her less tolerant of her students' grumblings and she uses her photographs and stories to show how hard some children have to work for an education.

Dianne is determined to continue helping through the Books for Cambodia Trust, which was set up to help the schools in Takeo establish libraries and improve their book collections.

For further information on Addventure travel go to www.vsa.org.nz. Spaces are still available for Cambodia travelling in January 2009 during the school holidays. •